Cavell, Skepticism, and the Ordinary Mind

By

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For my friends –
Not an equal part to each, but for each the whole.

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INTRODUCTION

Cavell's Philosophical Biography

Stanley Cavell's philosophical methodology and biography begins with J.L. Austin, whose work revealed to Cavell the depth and contingency of embedded practical commitments and activities within ordinary language, and in the work of the later Wittgenstein. In a lifelong, evolving, and well-known set of readings of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* Cavell claimed that the *Investigation*'s main theme was an encounter with temptations toward skepticism or metaphysics; and that the voices or interlocutors which comprise the chorus of the *Investigations* are in various stages of yielding to that skeptical temptation, including acquiescing to paradox. And then there is Wittgenstein's voice, Cavell thinks, which stands out above the rest. It is not a voice which defeats skepticism, but one which, over the course of that text, exemplifies a responsiveness to each particular temptation toward skepticism when and as it emerges from a human being, seeking "to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition."[1]

Throughout his work, as Cavell's philosophical writings progressed away from traditional scholarship on Wittgenstein, Austin, and ordinary language philosophy, and into deeply original philosophical essays on themes and figures unfamiliar to most philosophers, Cavell continued to foreground a Wittgensteinian responsiveness to particular skeptical or metaphysical temptations as a particular human being gives voice to them. And in this vein, Cavell gradually became frustrated, even despairing, of what

[1] Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 238-266.

he perceived to be the tendency of academic philosophers to engage in what he came to call a chronic "flight from the ordinary." By the late 1970s and certainly by the mid 1980s, Cavell had begun to suggest that apparently different but interrelated "areas" of philosophy such as philosophy of language, mind, and perception were permeated with what he called skepticism; and so Cavell, like Rorty, turned away from many recognizable philosophical problems. In a sense, this dissertation is an attempt to understand Cavell's turn away from the sort of problems he thought were hopelessly entangled with skepticism, but also to understand Cavell's return *to* something he thought was worth calling philosophy, a way of (philosophical) thinking that acknowledged the inescapable threat of skepticism.

So, what is skepticism, for Cavell? As is well known, in the process of tackling traditional skeptical problems of other mind and external world skepticism, the concept of skepticism undergoes extensive redefinition in Cavell's work – most famously in *The Claim of Reason*. Skepticism is an extremely broad category of analysis, for Cavell, a category which "take[s] the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute" it.[2] Skepticism as Cavell understands it, and as I explore in more detail in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, is not just the denial that we can achieve knowledge, but a "dialectical space" of philosophical questioning that, across different areas of philosophy, is marked by an inchoate attempt to escape or "flee" from the finite, practical, and social agreements, activities, and "forms of life" in which linguistic meanings are interwoven. This includes the social and finite agreements and activities in

[2] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46.

which we can meaningfully *assess* our assertions and claims. Skepticism is the bump we get, as Wittgenstein might put it, when running up against the limits of language.

What, more specifically, does that mean? Before giving an example, in this introduction, of a Cavellian diagnosis of skepticism of other minds (a bump we get from unearthing the fact that we are separate creatures, Cavell thinks) it will be useful to say one more general thing about Cavell's responsiveness to the dialectic between skepticism and the ordinary mind. For Cavell, the nature of our finite and fallible use of language entails that skepticism will remain a standing threat. There is no exit from this conflict between skepticism and the felt life of the ordinary mind; that conflict is itself constitutive of our finitude; and finitude, as Stephen Mulhall has written, is Cavell's central theme.[3] In a word, Cavell's interpretations of finitude rework the Cartesian conclusion that there is something we would like to, but cannot *know* (about whether what seems most apparent to us is in fact the case) and advocate instead for a Kantian interpretation of finitude whereby those "appearances" become conditions for the possibility of knowledge rather than barriers for knowledge. But for Cavell and for Cavell's Wittgenstein, who were after all part of the so-called "linguistic turn" in 20th Century Anglo-American Philosophy, Wittgensteinian conditions are not mediated by pure concepts of the understanding but by the social, historically specific, and practical

[3] Stephen Mulhall begins his introduction to *The Cavell Reader* with this: "The burden of Stanley Cavell's philosophy is an acknowledgement of human finitude" (1). And later on in the introduction, Mulhall writes: "…as Cavell finds himself having to remind us, nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as limitations and to repudiate the human condition of conditonedness or finitude in the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the inhuman" (9). See Stephen Mulhall, introduction to *The Cavell Reader,* ed. Mulhall (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 1-21. See also Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 130, 132, for further discussions by Mulhall of the role of finitude in Cavell's work. One can also see the influence of Cavell's thinking about finitude in Mulhall's *Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 48, for example.

activities in which language use is interwoven.[4] In this vein, Cavell argues for something that has now become standard fare in Wittgenstein scholarship, namely, that the *Investigations* mounts broadly speaking a Kantian project, in the sense that Wittgenstein seeks to show that the fallibility and finitude of language use requires reconceptualizing apparent limitations as conditions for wording the world, for making sense of the world at all.

To understand these points better, it is worth offering one central example of the way linguistic conditions can suddenly appear to function as limitations when entangled with a skeptical or metaphysical problematic – an example from Cavell's engagement with skepticism of other minds in *The Claim of Reason*. It is no more than a particularly provocative example; I intend it to be exemplary of a structure or form of what I call, throughout this dissertation, following Jim Conant, the "dialectical space of skepticism,"[5] as well as exemplary of Cavell's responsiveness to the human being who has become entangled in that space. It goes, roughly, like this.

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[4] Cavell puts this thought – that the understanding is transcendentally conditioned by language -- in a variety of different ways as his work evolves. One of the most famous comes from Cavell's interpretation of the Wittgensteinian concept of "criteria" in the first chapter of *The Claim of Reason,* where Cavell writes: "Wittgenstein's insight, or implied claim, seems to be….that all of our knowledge, everything we assert or question (or doubt or wonder about…) is governed not merely by what we understand as "evidence" or "truth conditions," but by criteria…Without the control of criteria in applying concept, we would not know what counts as evidence for any claim, nor for what claims evidence is needed" (14). See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 14. The precise nature of Cavell's concept of criteria and their relation to skepticism continues to be a matter of scholarly debate. On my view, criteria *are there*; they just don't matter to us until we become entangled in a skeptical problematic. And yet the force or relevance of this distinction– between criteria being *there* and their *mattering* to us – is itself understood best *through* the confrontation with skepticism. It's a complicated, very "meta," region of Cavell's thinking and one which I discuss, in part, in chapter four.

[5] For Conant's use of this phrase, see James Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 2012, 3. Accessed at: https://humstatic.uchicago.edu/philosophy/conant/Conant%202012%20Two%20Varieties%20of%20Skepticism.pdf. A shorter version of this chapter appears in Denis McManus, ed., *Wittgenstein and Skepticism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 97–136.

The Knowledge of Pain and Skepticism of Other Minds

When gripped by a certain skeptical "spirit," we are prone to conclude, merely based on another's *behavior*, that we can never really "know" they are in pain. A person may, for all the world, be screaming in pain; I may accept this identification for "practical purposes" and concede that that scream is a scream of pain. But for "*theoretical* purposes" I cannot grant that that scream and that writhing is sufficient to establish the existence of pain. After all, all I see it pain *behavior*! It seems that, at best, I must *infer* the existence or presence of "pain" – now construed as a mental state or inner condition of some kind -- from that pain behavior. Varieties of this argument in philosophy are referred to, as is well-known, as "skepticism of other minds." And rather than dismissing them, Cavell seeks to show that the skeptic about other minds has got their hands on something interesting – namely, the conditions for our ascribing mental or animated concepts to another – and interpreted those conditions as constraints. But how does Cavell show this?

Setting aside the more direct critique of asking what sort of "inner state" the concept of behavior is in contrast to here, one thing the skeptic has discovered is, Cavell argues, that we *retain* the concept of pain across cases of feigning, imitating, or performing.[6] That is, the skeptic has captured the insight that what we perform, pretend, and watch is *pain*. In the grip of what Cavell calls skepticism, this may feel deeply dissatisfying. Surely the cases of merely performing or feigning pain -- the cases

[6] I have in mind here a climactic moment that appears early on in *The Claim of Reason*: the argument that satisfying criteria for 'being in' pain does not guarantee the *existence* of pain, that criteria for pain can be satisfied (on the movie screen, in the theatre, when faking, etc.) without there *being* pain. Cavell writes that such circumstances "are ones in appealing to which, in describing which, we retain the concept (here, of pain) whose application these criteria determine. And this means to me: In all such circumstances he has satisfied the criteria we use for applying the concept of pain to others" (Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 45).

of seeing a body in pain on a movie screen, for example -- are lacking something which exists or is present in *real* instances of pain. Thus far, Cavell wouldn't disagree: of course there is a difference between an actor's pain on the movie screen and your pain, right here and now. But what is that difference?

The descent into what Cavell calls skepticism hinges, in this particular case, on imposing a philosophical requirement that misconstrues the nature of conceptual differences between various instances (on screen, in the case of just pretending, and the real case) of the concept of pain. For it may appear obligatory, even natural, to want to explain the priority of a "real" case of pain over a case of merely pretending, acting, and so forth. To do this, we might try to isolate the "mental state" or "inner sensation" of pain itself, or appeal, instead, not to anything "inner," but to a supranatural Entity or Platonic Form of pain, or perhaps to a rule or concept whose applications run along an independently existing track extending indefinitely into the future.[7] Although these are certainly distinct conceptual moves to make, and there may be an indefinite number of moves of this sort, Cavell is attuned to something these efforts have in common, a peculiar drive to distinguish the "real" case from the others in a particular way. In all of these cases, what pain *is* cannot be merely this "appearance," but this appearance *plus* something else, whether a special kind of "mental state" of pain, the satisfaction of a rule whose application is fixed in advance, or a Platonic entity whose presence guarantees the presence of "genuine" pain. The appearance/reality or seeming/being distinction takes on a particular shape here: the body becomes a veil rather than a picture or expression of the mind. If I have done enough to encourage these thoughts, then

[7] See John McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule Following," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, 38–53 (New York: Routledge, 2000).

perhaps I can now say: under skepticism an *apparently natural* and (what can even feel) obligatory philosophical problematic is opened up, a form of problematic that, throughout this dissertation, I call a "dialectical space of skepticism." And once such a space appears in our thinking, it seems, to the skeptic in us, necessary to engage with it.

For Cavell – as for other Wittgensteinians – the philosophical work to be done from this juncture is not to provide an *answer* to the skeptical spirit – that which seeks to determine what, once and for all, differentiates *real* (pain) from the mere *appearance* (of pain) – that has been set in motion. As such, Cavell will deny that we require a Platonic Form, inner entity, or something of the sort, to explain the conceptual differences between real pain and the feigning or performance of pain. To understand Cavell's delicate thinking here, however, it is important to understand the role that this anti-metaphysical denial of essences or private mental states plays; i.e., it is not as an *answer* to the skeptical question – leaving us thinking that there is still something we cannot know – but part of a broader Cavellian strategy of acknowledging finitude. More specifically, Cavell aims to "make intelligible" the inchoate worry or anxiety which is at stake and around which skepticism hovers. What Cavell wants to do is to show that the metaphysical problematic in our philosophy *deflects* – to use the Cavellian term that Cora Diamond has made famous[8] – a real, human difficulty that is still unrecognizable, preconscious, and unintelligible in the skeptic's procedure.

[8] For Diamond's famous use of Cavell's concept, see Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (2003), 11-12. Cavell uses the term "deflection" twice in his essay "Knowing and Acknowledging" to describe the sense in which, as I understand it, the skeptic turns a human form of life into an intellectual riddle, poses an intellectual question when, at best, what can be provided is a form of description of a natural capacity. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 238–66 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), and especially p. 247 and p. 260.

Let us see what this Cavellian procedure looks like, briefly, in the above case, the classic case of "other minds skepticism." Again, the skeptic questions whether "pain behavior" is sufficient to establish knowledge that another is in pain. Cavell thinks that the skeptic of other minds has grasped something difficult about the reality constraining our application of the concept of pain, a constraint which he calls "human separateness," a stand-in for the form of life in which, we might say, we are separate beings with a shared language. I do not *have (*your) pain the way you do, of course; this is just the way it is for me as a creature who is not you, who is *me* (this much the skeptic has got right, Cavell thinks, but its *significance* she has got wrong). Furthermore, to say that "this is just the way it is for me" is not to say that I can't wish or even imagine that things *could* be different, that we might possess and be constrained by a different form of life, one which allowed for ascriptions of pain to one other in different ways. We can easily imagine a machine that reads the brain's electromagnetic pulses in order to know whether someone who cannot *express* pain is *in* pain, for example.[9] Yet, given the contingent but natural fact or form of life[10] that we *are* separate, in ascribing the concept of pain to you I must, as it were, *passively* read the lines of your face *as* a

[9] There are deep and unexplored connections between Cavell's discussions of the way in which mental concepts apply to bodily expressions – fallibly but inescapability, insofar as we are to have mental concepts at all – and the study of autism and disability. Some severely autistic people, for example, lack the capacity to manifest emotion, feeling, states of mind, and so forth in bodily expressions. Their mind cannot be read with their body, and their body is thus not the best picture of their soul. What consequence this has for Cavell's Wittgenstein and the discussion of mental states – aside from limiting this discussion to the able-bodied and statistically more common language-user – is something that merits future analysis.

[10] One of Cavell's most widely-used conceptual contributions is his distinction between vertical (or more 'biological') and horizontal (or more 'conventional') forms of life. Eating with one's hands or with a fork and knife would be an example of the vertical or biological; eating as opposed to pecking or pawing at one's food would be an example of the horizontal or conventional. For one of the primary places where Cavell analyzes this distinction – and I believe the first place he uses these specific concepts – see Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures and After Emerson After Wittgenstein: the 1987 Frederick Ives Carpenter Lectures at the University of Chicago* (New Mexico: Living Batch Press, 1989), especially 41–43.

grimace, let those lines be expressive *of* a grimace. This involves allowing your grimace to make a claim on me.

In one sense, then, what the skeptic of other minds shows us is *not* that I cannot "know" you are in pain but that, to know you are in pain, I must acknowledge the claim your pain has made on me, a conceptual act which goes beyond mere "identification" of the fact that you are in pain. Skepticism reveals, for Cavell, not those aspects of our condition which cannot be *known*, but those aspects of our cognitive life which require a different *kind* of knowing in order to be known, a different kind of methodology, a category of cognitive response Cavell calls "acknowledgement." Achieving full knowledge of another's pain requires *acknowledging* that pain; i.e., finding a way to do justice to the fact that, for creatures like us, I cannot relieve you of your pain just as I cannot *have* your pain.[11]

But the skeptic's problem, Cavell finds, is that the skeptic (in us) harbors an unexamined wish to transcend or evade the fact of our separateness. The skeptic finds that the priority of acknowledgement is not a reality she wishes to face and subsequently denies that knowledge – here pictured as something which could overcome these constraints and allow me to "know" your pain -- is possible. In doing so, according to Cavell, the skeptic has *grasped* a constraint, the fact that you are you and I am me, on applications of the concept of pain, but as it were preconsciously rejected it. For Cavell, metaphysics – in any of its forms, as a rule on infinitely extending tracks, as a special sort of mental state, as Platonic Essence -- is a deflection of the need to come to terms,

[11] One under-read and little known but revealing essay by Cavell in which he discusses these topics is his "Comments on Veena Das's Essay 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996), 93-98.

to suffer, this aspect of our finite condition. So the proper response to metaphysics or skepticism is not anti-metaphysical theorizing but a "suffering" and acceptance of that condition.[12]

Cavell's task is therefore not to directly *refute* the skeptic and show that we, in fact, can "know" someone is in pain in the sense of "knowing" that the traditional philosopher takes for granted, as this would share in the skeptic's poor understanding of what she has, at some level, grasped. Cavell's task is rather to retrace the skeptic's steps, reformulate the issue that the skeptic has inexplicitly encountered, and make this experience intelligible. "A formidable criticism of skepticism – as of any serious philosophy – will have to discover and alter its understanding of itself."[13] Once reframed, reexamined, and accepted as irrefutable, skepticism appears very differently: in a word, as a confused effort to cope with or face the constraints and the difficulties of our condition, difficulties which in other artistic forms – such as literature and drama – we find more explicitly acknowledged; i.e., addressed and suffered.[14] So, for Cavell, in philosophy we have a knack for turning the contingent but inescapable facts of our finitude, the forms of life around which our concepts hover, into an "intellectual lack."[15]

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[12] By understanding Cavell as wanting to reckon with human finitude through a transformed relation to the finite constraints *within* our use of language, we can make better sense of why, over the course of the skeptical problematic, the skeptic (in us) becomes dissatisfied with the ordinary conditions of applying the concept of pain to bodily expressions. If ordinary linguistic attributions of pain take for granted as a natural fact the "form of life" of our separateness from each other – as would be entirely natural for linguistic creatures like us – then the skeptic seeks to transcend these ordinary attributions as part of the general attempt to transcend the natural fact of our separateness.

[13]. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 38. This is a point, and a passage, I return to in much more detail in chapter four.

[14] As I read his philosophical trajectory, it was with the publication of Cavell's 1970 *Senses of Walden* that he first discovers in the work of the American Transcendentalists a procedure of writing philosophically which engages with and centers the urge to escape from our finitude; later, as is well known, Cavell will criticize his own dismissal of Emerson, re-read Emerson's text and, in the process, fashion a reimagination of American Philosophy.

[15] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263.

Skepticism as a Human Difficulty

Moving outward from skepticism of other minds to skepticism in general, then, we can start to get into view the general form of Cavell's way of understanding skepticism as a response to a human difficulty. With the claim the skeptic has in effect not understood the philosophical problem they have encountered, Cavell argues that skepticism finds *expression* in questions of whether knowledge of the existence of the external world, knowledge of other minds, or knowledge of the meaning of signs is possible (all questions which take on a similar *shape* under the threat of skepticism), but that this expression is inadequate; we need a better conception of the *question* that skepticism poses for us.[16] As many interpreters of Cavell have noted, nearly all of the major and now famous concepts Cavell employs and explores in his texts – acknowledgement, finitude, criteria, the ordinary, use, among many others – are insights that the philosophical skeptic's questions and procedures have in a sense both revealed and concealed. That there *is* a (genuine) philosophical issue is *revealed* by the very presence of a skeptical problematic (which as I argue throughout this dissertation is a much broader and wide-reaching phenomenon than it is typically understood to be). But at the same time, the skeptical problematic also conceals the key concepts and insights through an effort to transcend or evade the "experience" which gave rise to it in the first place. This dual structure of revelation and concealment, of disguised, pre-

[16] Cavell shares this general insight, not only with Hume, but also with several of his contemporaries who are perhaps more squarely in the analytic epistemology tradition, figures like Barry Stroud and Thompson Clarke. Both Clarke and Stroud argued that the question skepticism awakens for us should not be: "do I really know I am here, in a dressing gown, sitting by the fire" but rather *how* I know I am here, in a dressing gown, sitting by the fire. Clark's" The Legacy of Skepticism" in *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 20: 754-769; and Stroud's *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

conscious insight, is what in the third chapter I describe as the mixed legacy of skepticism, and I argue that it is a useful orienting frame to think of Cavell's philosophy as *itself* part of the mixed legacy of skepticism.

If we retrace our steps and return to the desire to grasp an inner essence or Platonic entity of pain, we can also see how *irrelevant* this metaphysical desire is to what Cavell understands as the underlying issue with skepticism. For Cavell, when gripped by skepticism, by the skeptic in ourselves, we end up searching for something which even if we were to grasp "it" – though for Cavell there really is no "it" here – it would *not* help us better understand our question. We seek to know something which -- to use a phrase of Cora Diamond that will be central to this dissertation -- "could make no difference to us in any case."[17] And once we have obtained clarity about what kind of experience had awakened the metaphysical difficulties, we will stop, by our own accord, asking those questions. And that would be the end of the Cavellian Wittgenstein's intervention, until the next skeptical problem arises.

Cavell and the Limits of Philosophical Authority

At this point an objection might arise. It would go like this: "how does Cavell know the skeptic's experience *better than the skeptic does*?" If it is true that the skeptic "*deflects* the truth to which he is responding,"[18] as Cavell's now-famous formulation of

[17] Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit" in *Realism and the Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 42. The full passage reads like this: "We have a picture here of the philosophical 'realist' as someone misled by phantoms, by what appears to make sense but is really nonsense, by what could make no different to us in any case" (42.)
[18] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 260.

the origin of metaphysics has it, how does Cavell know that? Can he see inside the skeptic's mind?

Here we encounter Cavell's thinking about the limits of philosophical authority. The argumentative or logical inferences which propel Cavell's philosophical methodology forward are rooted in Cavell's own "experience" (construed as the rich, thick, "felt life of the mind"[19]). These inferences are thus not *deductive* in the familiar sense, that is, they are not contained in the concepts which Cavell is using; nor are they "pure" in anything like the rationalist's sense, as innate or internal to the mind prior to experience. Instead something almost entirely opposite is true: Cavellian concepts arise from Cavell's own experience and serve specific aims and purposes in his philosophy. They thus do not seek to have deductive or universal validity, but to – as he famously puts it – *find* and *found* a community that shares his sense of the way things seem to him, and which will not include everyone. In doing philosophy in this way, Cavell puts his own experience forward as -- hopefully -- exemplary, *arrogates* his experience and seeks to share it. In other words, to understand Cavell's confrontation with skepticism, one cannot (just) follow his arguments; one must also lend Cavell's prose the possibility of showing or revealing new aspects of experience which we -- you! -- may have missed. Like a work of literature, drama, or fiction, and arguably like many other truly original philosophies, to read Cavell's engagement with skepticism most fully we have to "get inside" the world opened up by his prose.[20] We have to trust that the obscurity and

[19] The phrase is Marilyn Robinson's. See her *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self: The Terry Lectures (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 35.
[20] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging, 240.

difficulty of that prose is not a mist or haze, to paraphrase what Cavell says of Emerson's prose, but a function of the difficulty of what he is trying to express.

In an odd way, then, by going deeper into his own experience and noticing what was true for him, Cavell also made room for plurality. "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty," Cavell was fond of writing, renewing a quote from Emerson.[21] Especially in his work after *The Claim of Reason,* Cavell often wrote in such a way as to explicitly make room for what another sensibility or another mood might say or do at a specific juncture in his argument, writing in such a way that exemplifies a plurality of interpretation and knowledge and clearing ground for disagreement rooted in the possibility of agreement. Cavell is in effect inviting us to share his experience, to "dig as he digs," as he puts it while still stuck in the 60s. This presents, for Cavell's readers or interpreters, many difficulties. How do we honor Cavell's claims, which are, in the end, based off of his experience, without creating mere followers? On what grounds do we disagree with him? There will be more to say about these important questions in the conclusion, questions which I think ought to be more explicit in any possible future of Cavell scholarship, but for now I just want to mark them as an important issue for readers of Cavell, an issue made even more palpable, of course, by his death in summer 2018, and thus his resounding silence regarding whatever it is we have to say about him.

[21] For the Emerson quote, see Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in *Essays: First Series*. Cavell returns to the passage in Emerson's essay for insight into his own method beginning in the 1980s, including in what I take to be perhaps Cavell's most painstakingly composed essay, "Something out of the Ordinary," his address to the American Philosophical Society in 1996. See Cavell, "Something out of the Ordinary," in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 7-27.

Cavell and "The New Wittgenstein" (in America)

Cavell is the principal but not the only Wittgensteinian on whom I draw in this dissertation. In contemporary scholarship on Wittgenstein, Cavell has often been put into conversation with Cora Diamond and Jim Conant, who have put forth a "Resolute" reading of Wittgenstein's work which is deeply compatible with, though also in some ways different from, Cavell's evolving set of interpretations of Wittgenstein. Although this dissertation does not engage in the "Resolute" debate at all, it may be worth saying a few things about the Resolute reading here, as I do often draw on the work of Diamond and Conant while working through a Cavellian response to skepticism.

In a word, the "Resolute" reading of the later Wittgenstein, closely allied with what has been called "the New Wittgenstein" which emerged in the early 2000s[22], also takes the *Investigations* to constitute a series of confrontations with the temptation toward skepticism or metaphysics. But beginning with Cora Diamond's 1989 essay "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*"[23] and more generally in her wonderful and now quite famous *Realism and the Realistic Spirit*[24]*,* these readers of Wittgenstein argue, in flat contradistinction to a tradition of philosophy that elevates the role of proposition or assertion above all other forms of human communication, that, strictly speaking, Wittgenstein's work contains no propositions, declarative statements, or "assertions" of any kind. Every move Wittgenstein makes is either an interlocutor advancing a position from within the temptation(s) to metaphysics or

[22] The first text most influential text remains the anthology, *The New Wittgenstein,* ed. Alice Crary and Rubert Read, (New York: Routledge, 2001). That text aims to show similarities in the influence and inheritance of Wittgenstein in the work of Cavell, John McDowell, and Cora Diamond.
[23] Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*" in *Realism and the Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 179-205.
[24] Diamond, "in *Realism and the Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

skepticism, giving voice to the temptation, or else responding to that temptation in some way. Ultimately, what Conant has recently called "the Wittgensteinian way"[25] with skepticism involves trying to retrace the initial steps that lead us into skepticism, a procedure which at this level of generality would also include Cavell's procedure. But more controversially, for the world of Wittgenstein interpretation at any rate, Diamond and Conant take this description of Wittgenstein's philosophy – to not advance theses, to continually and dynamically respond to the insurmountable temptation toward skepticism and metaphysics in philosophy – to be true of the *Tractatus* as well as the *Investigations*.

I do not take a stance on that claim in this dissertation. What I do take on from the Resolute reading is a claim about the fact that and the *way* in which philosophy of language is the hinge of the Wittgensteinian approach. New Wittgensteinians, including Cavell, do not read *the Investigations* as equipping us with a kind of "philosophical expertise" *we did not already possess* for determining the "meaning" of terms, signs, or sentences, or for giving an account of how such meaning is possible. According to Wittgenstein and Cavell, philosophers do not have a unique body or sub-discipline of knowledge about "meanings" – at bottom they have nothing more than the knowledge that comes from being raised or socialized in a particular culture and language. And yet they also hold that skepticism or metaphysics distorts or loses track of the meaning of words, and that this distortion in language leads to nothing short of epistemological "fantasies" of what knowledge and objectivity might be like.[26] Put otherwise, the "New

[25] See Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism" (2012), p. 63.
[26] Diamond, "Realism and the Realistic Spirit," in *Realism and the Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 50-51. In these passages Diamond speaks of "fantasies of how words work" (an idea I take up in the first chapter) and of "unrealism in discussing some philosophical question having its source in unrealism about language or meaning" (51).

Wittgensteinian" idea is not that philosophy legislates what we can and cannot say according to rules of sense which Wittgenstein's philosophy provides – as if Wittgenstein was in the business of telling people what they can and cannot say.[27] For the New Wittgensteinians, philosophy draws on a substratum or untapped well of knowledge that all of us cannot fail to possess to some extent. This is quite different from a large body of work on Wittgenstein which focuses on Wittgenstein's concepts of "rules," "grammar," and "criteria" to develop a conception of sense and nonsense.[28]

This also puts Cavell and "the New Wittgenstein" in an odd and aversive position with respect, not only to many other interpreters of Wittgenstein, but also to much of contemporary philosophy of language. Much of contemporary philosophy of language is devoted to giving an account either: (1) of what the "semantic meaning" of ordinary expressions *really* is (sometimes referred to as a "semantic theory" of meaning); or (2) of the foundations of meaning, that is, establishing the basis, or in virtue of what, expressions in a language come to have the meaning they do (sometimes referred to as a "foundational theory" of meaning.). These tasks are obviously related, but from a New Wittgensteinian perspective, these kinds of philosophical investigations of language begin with a sense of words as meaningless text or as meaningless signposts standing in need of interpretation, as dead signs needing to be brought to life and interpreted. Whereas, for Wittgenstein, as Alva Noe puts it, "our relation to the world is not that of a

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[27] The idea is rather that certain forms of metaphysical philosophizing, cut off from ordinary, human practices and interests, amounts to a "fantasy of how words work." C.F. Diamond, *Realism and the Realistic Spirit,* 50-1.

[28] It is difficult to say anything here that won't be contentious. For Conant in particular, the work of P.M.S. Hacker has been a target of criticism. The difference in interpretation between Conant Hacker lies, as Hacker himself paraphrases things, partially in the question of whether "Wittgenstein sought to expose metaphysical utterances as nonsense on the ground that they transgress specific rules of logical syntax (according to the *Tractatus*) or grammar (according to the later philosophy)." See P.M.S. Hacker, "Wittgenstein, Carnap, and the New American Wittgensteinians," *The Philosophical Quarterly,* Vol. 53: 210 (2003), p. 2.

creator. The world is bigger than we are; what we are able to do is be open to it – that is, we are able to find our way around in it."[29] The idea that we are not "creators" of the world of meaning and that, instead, we are born into a social, partially shared, already meaningful world, accounts, I think, for part of the sense of ineluctable finitude which pervades both Cavell and Wittgenstein's writing. If skepticism deals with words and signs as lifeless thing needing to be brought to life, to successfully *confront* skepticism is to return, for Cavell's Wittgenstein, to the already-present social space of meaning, into the ordinary use and circulation of words in a particular time and place – but to return transfigured and more conscious of the threat of skepticism.

Like Cavell's various readings of the *Investigations*, then, the "Resolute" reading of Wittgenstein not only takes Wittgenstein's philosophy to be a fervent and existential confrontation with skepticism, in nearly every sentence of his work, but also takes skepticism to be a shape or space of philosophical questioning that we can feel both compelled to engage with, *and* which cannot be defeated. For Cavell as for the resolute readers, skepticism does not advance human or humanistic interests or values and may even deny space for a role of those interests and values, as chapter two of this dissertation argues. And yet for these readers, too, including Cavell, to put it bluntly: these dialectical spaces of skepticism still pervade the professional pursuit of philosophy, a claim I defend in some detail in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, but about which I should also say something here.

[29] Alva Noe, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 184.

Framing of the Dissertation

Returning now to Cavell's work in particular, and to the limited scope of this dissertation, the main "skeptical" problem I engage with in different ways throughout this dissertation is what, in philosophy, we describe as the problem of 'how language hooks onto the world,' how what we say corresponds with or accurately represents the world. It can seem that we are faced with a "medium" of representation – language – and a set of objects to be represented – "the world." The problem is whether or not language represents the world; in other words, a metaphysical gap has been opened up which *requires* that we account for the relation between words and world. And from this point forward it can seem pressing that we find a way to close that gap.

This "skeptical" drive to assess the accuracy or veridicality of language against the world takes – I argue, following Cavell and Jim Conant – a similar shape across various areas of philosophy. We can ask the same form of question about the veridicality of our "perceptions," "ideas" or "representations" as we can about our language – we can feel that *realism* requires that we compare their correspondence with or resemblance to "reality" or "the world." These questions, across apparently *different* problems in philosophy balloon into parallel and structurally similar forms across different areas of philosophy.

Direct responses to this problematic, which insist on the "non-representational" nature of language, for example, can leave us thinking that there is something "more" which language *could* do – represent reality. But Cavell aims to show us that rational constraints do not *require* this two-world picture of language/thought, on the one hand, and reality/world on the other. Cavell does not aim to "answer" the metaphysical

question, but to show us that language's being answerable to the world does not require such a picture.

My Cavellian argument is that this form or space of skeptical questioning – regardless of whether we are asking about the veridicality of the appearance of another's pain, about the veridicality of the meaning of a word or phrase, about the veridicality of a perception, etc. -- leaves behind the ordinary, finite, and social activities and practices which make meaningful language use possible. But I do not mean "left behind" in the sense that returning to these finite and social practices of language use will defeat skepticism. As we saw, Cavell thinks that the direct attempt to defeat skepticism has still not adequately understood what the appearance of a skeptical problem has deflected. Rather, in Cavell's philosophy, if we return to the everyday use of language after working through the threat of skepticism and after coming to terms with what lead us into skeptical thinking, what we find is a renewed (linguistic) relation to the felt life of the ordinary mind, one which acknowledges those "unhandsome" elements of our condition which skepticism would seek to deny. In later work, Cavell will describe the proper response to skepticism as a transformation of the "actual everyday" into the "eventual everyday." With respect to the question of how language corresponds to or represents the world, I suggest, throughout this dissertation, that this question is a confused response to the fact of our inheritance of language and culture, the fact that we are born into a social, already-made system of meanings over which in many ways we have astonishingly little freedom. And that conclusion, I argue – the conclusion that a particular form of skepticism deflects – is yet another starting point for Cavell's philosophy, an insight brought out *through* an engagement with skepticism.

Brief Outline of the Chapters

One might hold out hope that at the end of a project like this one I would come to understand the subject matter better than I did at the start. And that is happily the case here; but it also makes the road map of the dissertation which follows different than the one I would have drawn at the start.

In the first chapter, I try, perhaps a bit paradoxically, to give a conceptual argument for the necessity of the individual human voice in philosophy. I draw on the work of James Conant and give an initial litmus test for "metaphysical"/"skeptical" uses of language versus "everyday" uses of language; the test concerns the difference between (1) asking after the meaning of expressions "in isolation from their concrete uses" and (2) asking after the meaning of an expression when a human being has an interest in meaning or saying something by that expression. I try to show that skeptical or metaphysical uses of language are not just devoid of "context" – Wittgenstein is far more than just a contextualist about meaning – but that furthermore they empty out any interest or purpose we might have for an utterance. I then try to argue that specific, finite, purposes and interests are necessary for the achievement of semantic meaning. And I suggest, following Cavell, that skepticism seems to harbor a *drive* to avoid precisely these finite dimensions of meaning: to empty out our own contributions, values, interests from human speech, to as it were get beyond shifting and contingent human interests and purposes and make language work "all by itself," without the need for a human voice behind them. I suggest but do not by any means prove that such a drive will ultimately end in paradox.

The second chapter takes a more indirect route to identifying and confronting skepticism in a Wittgensteinian spirit. I try to give an account of the source, for

Wittgenstein, of a confused idea of meaning as correspondence between words and the world. I argue that, considered as an abstract correspondence or relation between ideas and reality, such an idea is an example of the sort of fantasy, the sort of attempt to surpass the human and escape from finitude, that Cavell labels "skepticism" and that Wittgenstein aims to diagnose. But at the same time, we *do* have several techniques of evaluating "resemblance or correspondence to reality." These techniques, however, are internal to our practices and to our "use" of words; they are established through and internal to practical activity. It is from these practical activities which house or contain "correspondences with reality," Wittgenstein thinks, that we get our philosophical idea of "Correspondence with Reality." Once we see the home of the philosophical idea in technique and ordinary activity, we are supposed to see that such a philosophical idea could make no difference for us in any case – that neither affirming nor denying it makes a difference to objectivity – and thus that such an idea turns an "idle wheel."

In the third chapter, I return to one of the main themes of this introduction and argue that skepticism's drive to deny (or transcend) the human is not just a curse, in Cavell's philosophy. The confrontation with skepticism, in short, throws us back upon what it is about ourselves and our words which we wish to deny or escape *from*: elements of our finite condition; the fact that we are born into an already established network of meanings, the fact that other persons are separate from us even though we share a language, and so on. I argue that just one of the many things which Cavell thought were difficult to accept about being human, and difficult to live well in relation to, is the idea that not all of what we take to be a "matter of fact" is independent from what sort of ethical stance we take toward that fact. This has been well documented with respect to skepticism of other minds: namely that Cavell thinks at bottom that "other

mindedness" is an ethical question. However, in this chapter, I concentrate on the perception or reception of what is "animate," in Cavell's philosophy, as opposed to "inanimate," and argue that there is an ineluctable ethical decision or posture involved in determining that boundary – not just in other minds, but in terms of living beings more generally. Skepticism in Cavell's philosophy can thus be further understood as the drive to escape from the responsibility involved in recognizing the role of the ethical stance in determining certain factual boundaries.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I try to think *with* Cavell by showing the role of the threat of skepticism in Early Modern European philosophy and in Thomas Hobbes in particular. I take up Cavell's suggestion that modern "skepticism" – as Cavell understood it – undergoes a particular intensification in the early modern period in Europe, and I seek to identify the role that the threat of skepticism played, in shaping the questions asked and the possible range of satisfactory answers, in Hobbes's thinking in particular. As in the second chapter, I critique the idea of "the resemblance or correspondence between our ideas and reality" as a model of objectivity, but instead of showing the humble home of such an idea in "practices" or techniques, as in the second chapter, in this chapter I allow this idea to reach it's paradoxical conclusion in Hobbes's philosophy. I show how well Hobbes's attempt to link ideas to reality through the cause/effect relation maps onto James Conant's framework for identifying the marks and features of a skeptical space. I show that Hobbes represents an especially interesting case for thinking about skepticism. And the chapter is also the first detailed attempt, among those who write on Cavell, to apply Conant's framework for Cavellian skepticism to a canonical figure in the history of philosophy.

There is only so much introducing one can do to writing that is also an activity, a movement, of thinking. So, with that much said, let's begin.

CHAPTER 1

Cavell, Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Use

For Stanley Cavell, to use a Heideggerian phrase that becomes important in Cavell's later thought, *human* beings are "beings for whom things matter."[30] A recurring theme of Cavell's philosophy, showing up differently in different regions of his work, is that there is no intelligible realm of human (conceptual) life which is free from human questions about what counts for us, what matters to us, and what is (humanly) important. In fact, Cavell, like Heidegger, will go so far as to identify "indifference," the condition in which some things do *not* matter to us more than others, as both cause and effect of (what he calls) "skepticism."[31] For Cavell, "value-laden" cares and commitments providing direction in a human life are not in conflict with the commitment to objectivity, but are rather constitutive of that commitment. But the way in which those cares are "constitutive" of objectivity does not negate the fact *that those cares are both fallible and revisable*. These claims about the nature of objectivity and the role of human values continues to go against the grain of much of modern philosophy and modern culture's dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, between valueless fact and "factless" value.

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[30] "We are beings who have 'outlooks, or prospects, something in view – in short, beings for whom things matter (unlike matter); the beings, I keep putting it, for whom things and beings count" (Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson After Wittgenstein* [Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989], 14). There is much work to be done continuing to understand Cavell's engagement with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, but in this essay I want to understand this thread – that we are beings for whom things matter – as it connects to questions of meaning in philosophical of language.

[31] Ibid., 46. In full, Cavell writes: "Philosophy (as ascent) shows the violence that is to be refused (disobeyed), that has left everything not as it is, indifferent to me, as if there are things in themselves."

In this chapter, rooted in recent scholarship on Cavell and "the New Wittgenstein," I take up Cavell's above claim and analyze it at the level of language and meaning. I show that, for Cavell, the absence of concrete, human cares and commitments – what Cavell calls the *point* of an utterance – leads to the absence of a determinate meaning for an expression and, accordingly, into what Cavell calls "skepticism." I start from Cavell's reading or inheritance of Wittgenstein's claim that "the meaning of a word is its use in our language"[32] before turning to a distinction suggested by Jim Conant in his work on Cavell. Conant differentiates between (1) asking after the meaning of expressions "in isolation from their concrete uses,"[33] and (2) asking after the meaning of an expression when a human being has an interest or care in meaning or saying something by that expression. At first glance, this distinction is not so complex – it is nothing more than the difference between "the meaning of a sentence itself" and the meaning of a sentence when we understand what a particular person is trying to say with it. I argue, however, that on a Cavellian vision of language and (at least sentential) meaning, the absence of a particular person's care and commitment does not amount to objectivity, but rather a loss of accountability to (human) reality, to *emptiness* in our use of language. If this right, then the very thing that we might think of as an *impediment* to objectivity – our value-laden cares and commitments, our investments to one thing rather than another – is in fact a condition for it. And, on

[32] The relevant passage is cited below, p. 5: "In a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Shulte, 4th ed. [UK: Blackwell, 2009], §43).
[33] The phrasing is Jim Conant's. See James F. Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005), 51–65.

Cavell's reading, this is precisely to say that the skeptic interprets constraints on our linguistic life as barriers or limitations.

Moreover, I interpret Cavell to be saying that there is a sense, perhaps especially true in philosophizing, in which we are actively *drawn* toward the emptiness of assertions in order to arrive at a conception of objectivity which seeks to cancel out the role of human care and commitment. "I find the motive to skepticism in this emptiness itself," Cavell writes, such that "I must empty out *my* contributions to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning."[34] For Cavell, however, neither is the skeptic (in us) *unmotivated* to empty out care and commitments from our assertions: these cares and commitments may be conditioned by our inheritance of language and culture, the acceptance of which threatens to define or even dominate us, a threat that later Cavell will mark by the concept of "conformity." But rather than a wholesale rejection (*or* acceptance) of the role of cares and commitments in human life – a rejection which Cavell thinks can propel us literally into an emptiness of our life with words, an acceptance of which reduces us to conformity – we can gradually, in a piecemeal, intersubjective way, revise, clarify, and prioritize those cares and commitments. Or to sum this up in Cavell's dramatic, dense prose: "the ordinary alone has the power to move the ordinary."[35] Such a project of piecemeal, finite conversation about our cares and commitments is the core of what Cavell has famously called Emersonian perfectionism.

[34] Cavell, "Declining Decline," 57.
[35] Ibid., 47.

Words and Tools

The successful transmission of what philosophers of language call "semantic meaning," or *what* we communicate when we do in fact communicate to one another, is a mysterious thing. Among other questions, it asks how it is that a sound or sign – a mere mark on paper, a moment of noise – comes to matter or mean something communicable and determinate, comes to mean even something *more or less* "the same thing" for two communicators. Does 'meaning' lie buried in words, like a core or a kernel, or does meaning lie above words, in another realm that words somehow "participate" in, as Plato has Parmenides assert in the dialogue that bears his name?

In an increasingly famous passage from *The Claim of Reason,* Cavell connects the possibility and achievement of semantic meaning – and a reading of Wittgenstein's so-called "use-theory of meaning" – to an acceptance of human finitude, where finitude is parsed in terms of "what an expression mean[s] or say[s] on specific occasions by human beings":

> "The meaning is the use" calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or say on specific occasions by human beings … And to trace the intellectual history of philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. It is a concentration one of whose consequences is the traditional search for the meaning of a word in various realms of objects … A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human.[36]

This passage calls attention to key features of the Cavellian-Wittgensteinian vision of semantic meaning. We can see that there are at least two different emphases: (1) on the specificity and contextual nature of the expression; and (2) on the fact that a *human*

[36] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 206-207.

being has meant or said something by that expression. Both emphases or requirements will be important in what follows, but unfurling their significance for Cavell, as we'll see, proves difficult, in part because their significance, like so much of Cavell's thought, is best brought out through a confrontation with skepticism. A good starting place for understanding the passage, however, is the later Wittgenstein's claim that "the meaning is the use."

Perhaps the most famous passage of the *Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein actually says something like "meaning is use," is section 43:

> In a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.[37]

It is tempting to read passages like this one as reducing language use to a form of instrumentality, as a means to a given end. Although there are an indefinite number of ways of construing what this "means-end" relationship might amount to, one would be to understand words as instruments or tools for the goal of achieving determinate semantic meaning. Meaning thus becomes a kind of entity which is fundamentally connected to words and yet also separable from them; or as Wittgenstein puts it, we have a conception of meaning here which is "of the same kind as the word, even though different from the word."[38] On this view, words must be similar enough to "meanings" to be able to signify and somehow "connect" with them, yet different enough to be separable from them.[39] However, although understanding words as mere instruments for meaning might, after all, seem to provide us with the specificity and contextual

[37] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §43.
[38] Ibid., §120.
[39] In response to something like this conception of meaning, Plato has Parmenides suggest that words "participate" in a separate realm of entities called meanings in the dialogue *Parmenides*.

requirements of Cavell's interpretation – since instruments are both individually specific and their use is tied to contextual aims and purposes – Cavell complicates this picture significantly, as we will see.

In any case, we do find an acknowledgement of the instrumentality of language in the later Wittgenstein's work. One example would be the famous metaphor of the "toolbox":

> Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule a glue-pot, glue nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse [different, *vershieden*] as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)[40]

There is *some* sort of analogy between language and tools being made here. But if we pay close attention to the specific wording of this carefully written passage, we find that Wittgenstein is not quite saying that words are *like* tools; he is saying, rather, that the functions of words are as different or heterogeneous (*verschieden*) as the functions of tools. The difference in the analogies is significant: on the one hand, words are a set of heterogeneous instruments and, thus, reduced to a form of instrument; on the other, words are as different *from each other* as a set of heterogeneous instruments. Additionally, on this second view, if words are as different from each other as tools are different from each other, then the focus is not on instrumentality, but on *difference* – and on difference *within* sameness, within the same linguistic concept (of being a "word.") If this is right, then while Wittgenstein's famous comparison of language with the toolbox is supposed to suggest how much difference or heterogeneity is in the

[40] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §11.

concept of "words" – just like the different uses to which we can put tools – he is not *reducing* words to a merely instrumental function.

We can now begin to understand what Cavell will mean by calling attention to the variety of practical activities in which language use is interwoven. Before unpacking this idea further, however, there is another, much more seductive and perhaps common reading of Wittgenstein's claim that "the meaning is the use" that should be addressed before turning to Cavell's reading of it.

What Is the 'Is' in "Meaning is Use?"

On one particularly seductive interpretation of "the meaning is the use," the meaning of a word or phrase is just its meaning on any given use – and not necessarily a reductively instrumental use – of that word or phrase by a speaker of the language. This would, once again, seem to both give us (1) the specificity or contextual nature of Cavell's reading, and (2) the presence of a human being in contributing to the meaning of an expression on that occasion of use.

Yet there is a significant problem with this reading as well. On one interpretation of it, for any empirical occasion of use in which a speaker has "used" or employed a word or phrase the meaning of the word or phrase is identical with that use. That is, any time any speaker of English employs a word – "apple," "slab," "blue," "pain" – the meaning of that word is identical to that use. But this is deeply ambiguous, particularly concerning what notion of *identity* is at work here; i.e., what it means to say that the meaning of a

word is identical to its use.[41] In order to get the identity relation between "meaning" and "use" that this simplistic reading relies on, we need to be able to say that, *whatever* the use is here, "it" is identical to the meaning. We need, in other words, to adapt the external position of someone watching or observing the use of language and assume that we already know what the meaning is. Consequently, if we do not have the "entire" meaning in view here, then we are left with an empty identity relation between meaning and use without being able to specify what either – the meaning or the use – actually amounts to. It is like saying that whatever I eat for breakfast tomorrow *will be* what I will eat for breakfast tomorrow. True as this may be in some sense, it doesn't tell us anything.

One way to better understand the difficulty here is by noting that the external, empirical position of any use of a word – in which we identify the "meaning" of a word with any given empirical "use" of a word – seems *initially* plausible. There must, after all, be *something* that the "meaning" is identical with, and "use" sounds reasonable enough. As soon as we step "inside" of language use and try to specify what the "use" actually amounts to, however, it is no longer obvious *what* the meaning must be identical with. Let us take any specific, concrete occasion of employing an any ordinary word and ask ourselves where, exactly, the boundaries of the concept lie. Do we have, for example, the entire meaning of the "words" 'I,' 'slab' 'pain,', etc., present to mind when we use them? In other words, do we already *know in advance* exactly where the

[41] That Wittgenstein is not using a special or technical sense of "use," but is instead trying to get us to change our patterns of attention to something already there but difficult to get into view, is clear from the variety of synonymous words he uses throughout the *Investigations* which are translated by the English word "use." The German nouns *Benutzung*, *Gebrauch*, and *Anwendung* are all sometimes translated as "use," sometimes as "employment," and sometimes in other ways. I think what this shows is that there is nothing special about the word "use" – that the perspective on language which Wittgenstein is trying to have us adapt is not tied to any particular word.

contours of our concepts are, such that if *x* or *y* feature of that concept were to turn out to be false, we would have to concede that we *don't* actually have a grasp of that concept? If not – and here the (metaphysical) anxiety quickly creeps in – then what is there for "use" to be identical with?[42]

A famous Wittensteininian example – perhaps a bit misleading if taken out of context[43], but relevant for this particular point – is the meaning of the word "Moses." Let's say that, by using the word 'Moses' we mean to "refer" to the leader of the Israelites. So far there doesn't seem to be any problem. But, Wittgenstein writes, as if giving voice to the philosophical perplexity:

> If I make a statement about Moses, am I always ready to substitute some *one*…description… for "Moses?" I shall perhaps say: By "Moses" I mean the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or any rate much of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must turn out to be false for me to give up my proposition as false? So is my use of the term "Moses" fixed and determined for all possible cases?[44]

Wittgenstein is bringing out a peculiar kind of anxiety that, to know what I mean when I "use" the word 'Moses,' I must have a fixed and precisely determined concept, with clear boundaries, the exact content of which I have made apparent to myself. Am I prepared to recognize, for example, just what portion of the set of my knowledge of Moses's life must remain in place in order to say – if something changes in the future – that I still understand who or what 'Moses' means? When I use the word 'Moses,' do I have the entire list of associated and relevant facts before my mind and, not only that, but those

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[42] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §79. A further thought: if we do *not* have the whole meaning of a word present to mind while we use the word, then "should it be said," as Wittgenstein writes at a similar juncture of mind, "that I'm using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense?"

[43] More specifically, the context of this section in Wittgenstein is a critique of Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions

[44] Ibid., §78.

which I would be prepared to forgo while still claiming that I understand who or what 'Moses' means?

It seems uncontroversial to assert that we *don't* have these kinds of "meanings" in mind when we use words. If so, however, then we seem to find ourselves in a bind: if in using words I do *not* have a hold on a fixed and determinate concept, then it seems that the skeptic, in denying that I know the meanings of my words, has won; but if I affirm that the term I use *is* fixed and determinate in this way, then I seem to be affirming something which I don't (in any obvious sense at least) possess, while nonetheless *having* to affirm it given the alternative. Consequently, I find myself trapped in a dialectical space of metaphysical questioning about whether I *do* in fact "know" the meanings of the words I use, where skepticism and metaphysics appear as the only horns of the dilemma.

Cavell seeks to show us that we have a way out which endorses neither metaphysics nor skepticism. Cavell's destructive project, in short, is to show us that *what* the skeptic (in us) denies that we "know" here is *not even* a possibility and, therefore, too, that what the skeptic might *affirm* is not even a possibility. If this interpretation is correct, then Cavell's *constructive* project is to show that the very appearance of this dialectical space of skepticism – where affirmation leads to metaphysics, denial to skepticism – is a mark or sign that the skeptic has encountered a constraint on our use of concepts that she has interpreted as a barrier or limitation. (It is far from clear, nonetheless, what precisely this [misinterpreted] constraint, in this case as in any case, amounts to.)

In short, Cavell's objective is to find a way of conceding that the meaningful and successful use of words does not require a certain philosophical notion of fixed and precisely determined concepts, to show that this philosophical *requirement* is not a requirement at all. But he needs to find a way of doing this without thereby *denying* that we ever know or understand the "meaning" of a word. The Cavellian problem is how to characterize the kind of "meaning" appropriate to a finite linguistic creature whose inherited language is constantly undergoing change but who is nevertheless able to operate with words successfully – to characterize this finite capacity for meaning without implying, as Stephen Mulhall puts it, that "there is something we cannot do."[45]

We will table the question about the kind of "meaning" appropriate to finite linguistic creatures until the final section of this chapter, which examines Cavell's concept of "projecting words into new contexts." For now, the point is that "use" – as in "meaning is use" – is for Cavell as well as "the New Wittgenstein" not so much a function of instrumentality (as in a broken hammer, unable to accomplish the task we need it to) but rather prompts a deeper question about the source and nature of the meaning of our concepts. In the next two sections, I will describe one possible way of grounding the concept of meaning in 'ordinary,' finite use by expanding on the Cavellian idea that the role of human care or commitment in the achievement of semantic meaning is a seeming constraint on the meaningfulness of our assertions that the skeptic has run against and sought to evade or transcend.

[45] Stephen Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense, and Imagination in* Philosophical Investigations §243-315 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

Conant's Cavell on Meaning and Use

In two related papers on Cavell and Wittgenstein,[46] Jim Conant is concerned with showing, on my reading, that the use of a word by a master of that language possesses a certain kind of *practical unity* that philosophical analysis – or breaking into parts – threatens to distort. It is worth restating the relevant part of Cavell's claim:

> 'The meaning is the use' calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or say on specific occasions by human being.[47]

As Conant writes, many interpreters of Cavell have read him[48] as suggesting that there is a difference between meaning and use while stressing the role of "use." On this (for Conant, mistaken) view, Cavell is saying that an expression already has *a* meaning before we specify the concrete occasion of its use, but that we don't *fully know* what an expression means until we specify the use. One way this can be worked out is by distinguishing between sentence's meaning (the meaning of the combined string of words which make up an expression) and *speaker's* meaning, a distinction very close to what we find in Grice.[49] Conant expresses this (mistaken) view of Wittgenstein's view as follows:

> … whereas Grice might have supposed that what the words of a sentence mean very nearly specifies what would be said on any speaking of them, Wittgenstein teaches us that – although the words do specify what is 'meant' in one sense of 'meaning' – there are two 'distinct notions of meaning', and thus what it 'meant'

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[46] I am drawing here on two particular essays written by Conant: James F. Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005), 51–65; and James F. Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," *Philosophical Investigations* 21, no. 3, (1998), 222–50.

[47] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 207.

[48] I have written "Cavell" after this point rather than "Cavell's Wittgenstein" (which is at one level more accurate) for the sake of simplicity and readability. If it becomes necessary to distinguish the two later on in the chapter, I will return to "Cavell's Wittgenstein" when discussing a reading or interpretation of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein.

[49] I mean the distinction between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning. See Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

> still remains to be settled…for [meaning] turns on something further: on the point of saying it, on one's reasons for so speaking.[50]

This understanding of "meaning is use," although it does help us see something important, is problematic because it splits meaning into two 'levels' of which meaning becomes the sum. This generates a kind of theoretical 'gap' between the sum of those two parts or levels and the whole. These levels are: (1) the meaning of the sentence itself; and (2) the intelligibility of the speaker's use of that sentence on any one occasion. Put otherwise, we might understand full well what a sentence means (insofar as the words have meaning), yet something additional is missing if we haven't also identified the occasion in which these words have been uttered, if we haven't also understood the words as uttered by a *particular* person. Consequently, as Conant writes, "*meaningfulness* has to do with sentences [the meaning of the sentence 'itself'] and *intelligibility* has to do with context-embedded speech acts [the role of the speaker]."[51] We thus have a gap between the meaningfulness of the string of words and the intelligibility of the particular speech act insofar as meaning becomes the composite of both.

To show that (1) is an idea we seem forced to affirm only after a theoretical distortion of the practical use of concepts in ordinary circulation, we might take an ordinary expression like "there is a lot of coffee on the table," as Conant says, drawing from Hilary Putnam, and supply "concrete occasions of use" for it.[52] What difference

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[50] Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 227.
[51] Ibid., 228; the emphasis is added.
[52] Conant understands this technique to follow from Wittgenstein's claim that "how a sentence is meant can be expressed by an expansion of it" (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §349). Though this example appears at the end of his papers, I find that it serves as a persuasive test-claim. See Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," 243. The text he draws from here is Hilary Putnam's "Skepticism and Transcendental Argument," an apparently unpublished manuscript.

does imagining a particular time, place, or even person mean for the semantic content of the expression?[53] Well, imagine that we're in the kitchen together and you've just spilled coffee and haven't realized it; I point to the mess and say: "there is a lot of coffee on the table." Here, I might be using this string of words to suggest that you should clean up your mess. Perhaps in another context you typically pour coffee for me, your surly boss, and it has just arrived; in a dry and pointed tone I inform you that "there is a lot of coffee on the table." Here, I'm using this string of words to order you around. Finally, imagine that we're at home, it's early morning, and I know you like coffee when you wake up; I smile and say, "there is a lot of coffee on the table." In this case I'm using this same string of words to inform you that there is coffee available for you. The point is, as Conant writes, that:

> This sentence may, on one occasion of speaking or another, say any number of indefinitely many distinct things – it may express indefinitely many distinct thoughts…If you wished to expand on what you meant in having said, "There is a lot of coffee on the table," depending on what you meant, a different would be required.[54]

Each of the "distinct thoughts" which the string of words "there is coffee on the table" can mean,[55] as we have seen, is made up of the same words: "There," "is," "coffee," "on,"

[53] Although in Conant's papers the example actually comes at the end, to illustrate the point he is making that "the meaning of the words" and the "intelligibility of the speaker's meaning" can't come apart in the way interpreters of Cavell have wanted them to, I have found that this example serves not only as an example, but also as a kind of test of the claim. For according to the view or theory we have just sketched, "the sentence itself" does not have a determinate content, does not express a determinant thought, before a concrete occasion of use has been sketched for it.

[54] Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 60.

[55] The nature of this modal force is obviously a tricky question. But it will be important, later, in the section on "projection," that on this view the full scope of this modal force *cannot* be fully specified in advance. That is, on this view there is in principle an indefinite number of thoughts that an ordinary sentence like "there is a lot of coffee on the table" can mean.

and so forth.[56] Accordingly, the "thought" or meaning which is expressed must be coming from somewhere *other* than the words themselves.

This is just to reiterate the point we've already made: that the sense or meaning of an expression cannot be grasped by analyzing the constituent parts of that expression. But does this example show or prove that the 'sentence itself' does not mean anything before a concrete occasion of use has been sketched for it? Whatever "there is coffee on the table" *means* before its use by a particular human being in a particular time and place is not *determinate* but, at best, hovers between various meanings. Further, it does not become reduced to one of the various things we might take it to mean after identifying an occasion of its employment, but neither does it determinatively signify any of the *other* of meanings. It is in this sense "indeterminate." To make it determinate would be to sketch an occasion of use for it, to provide an "expansion" of the sentence in the way Conant does above.[57]

As is well-known among Wittgensteinians, Conant and other "resolute" readers of Wittgenstein hold an "austere" view of nonsense in which, put briefly, the absence of determinant meaning for an expression ultimately amounts to plain gibberish. As such, a sentence whose meaning is "indeterminate," like the context-less and disembodied utterance described above, is no more meaningful than more straightforward instances

[56] As Conant writes: "In the sense in which it makes sense to speak of "the meanings of words" (that is, what the dictionary says their meaning us), the same "meaning of the word" is being drawn on for each of these words ("there," "coffee," "a lot," "is," "on," "the," "table") in each of these distinct uses of the sentence" (Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 61).

[57] It might be tempting to think that Conant and Cavell have just shown that ordinary language expressions are ambiguous. But in each of the concrete occasion of use, the expression *isn't* vague or ambiguous: on each concrete occasion of speech we have sketched, a determinate set of thoughts has been expressed, assuming we are the kind of creatures who can register orders, demands, and loving gestures. A capacity for multiplicity of meaning is ambiguous only if it's not clear *which* of these things an expression has meant.

of nonsense, sentences like "Caesar is a prime number" or "John is a jabberwocky."[58] In other words, Conant – who I take to be drawing on Cora Diamond as well as Cavell here – thinks that, for Cavell, there is no such thing as a positive view of nonsense, meaning, a thought which we *can* think, even if indeterminately, which amounts to nonsense. Nonsense is just nonsense : the absence of a determinate meaning of an expression; at one point, Diamond calls this view a "negative" view of nonsense.[59] A sentence which fails to achieve the requisite specificity and concreteness for meaning something determinate, therefore, doesn't retain a kind of sense from its individual parts (retained from analytic or dictionary definitions, let's say) but fails to have any "parts" (of meaning) at all; it is idle, like gears turning nothing.

Here, the component words of a sentence would not yet count as "parts" in the relevant sense. For Conant and Conant's Cavell, what is meant by any determinate expression cannot be "given by, or derived from, the meanings of the words…used."[60] Only an understanding of the "whole" meaning which the sentence has, on a particular occasion of use, can lead to an understanding of the role which the particular words have played in achieving that sense, thereby providing a context which turns patterns of words into "parts" of the expression. The difference between words and "parts" of an expression can be illustrated in part by the simple observation, given above, that on each determinate meaning of "there is coffee on the table," the words stay the same, and yet

[58] See especially Cora Diamond, "What Nonsense Might Be," *Philosophy* 56, no. 215 (1981), 5–22. On page 15, Diamond uses the terms "positive" and "negative" to describe the contrast between two ways of thinking about nonsense, and I have drawn on that way of characterizing it here.
[59] Conant writes: "Nonsense, according to the view that Cavell attributes to Wittgenstein, arises when there is an absence of sense. The view that Williams and McGinn attribute to Cavell takes philosophical nonsense to be due to an appropriate kind of presence of sense…" (Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 62).
[60] The wording comes from Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 208.

the meaning of the expression changes. For Cavell and Conant, meaning is grasped (by us and by creatures like us) from an expression only when it's used to say or mean *something*: until then, there are no parts in the relevant sense to analyze, for there are no *working* parts (of meaning) at all.

On this view of what makes linguistic-conceptual life possible, our separating an expression with determinate meaning into its component parts is liable to undermine the meaning as a whole, like unraveling a handmade sweater and ending up with mere thread.[61] A mistake we make in thinking about meaning is asking what contribution words make to the meaning of a sentence and aggregating those words to construct the thought expressed by the sentence. Instead, we should first ask what the whole meaning or thought[62] behind an expression is, for it is the determinate thought(s) that is expressed which breathes life into the words which compose it; the "words themselves" are not yet "part" of anything. Only after an expression has acquired a determinate thought can we ask what contribution to that thought the words make. "What we want to discover is thus not to be seen at all," Conant summarizes, "if we look at the mere isolated word rather than…the proposition in action."[63]

A way of reading what Conant has begun to argue here is that, for Cavell, the successful use of a word by a speaker of a language conveys a certain kind of practical unity that philosophical breaking into parts threatens to distort, leaving us with pieces

[61] As Conant puts it: "The 'parts' of a thought are only the sorts of parts that they are by virtue of the combination they make to the sense of the whole" (Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 232).
[62] For Conant and Cavell's purpose, which are not all purposes, I don't think it makes much of a difference which one of these terms we use. The point is to look at the whole meaning(s), or the thought(s), which an expression puts forth. The emphasis as I take it is with the difference between signs and meanings, or signs and "symbols" in early Wittgenstein's terminology, and so any word which gets this difference across will be acceptable for those purposes.
[63] Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," 233.

out of which we cannot (re)construct the whole. Differentiating between (1) the meaning of a sentence itself and (2) the intelligibility of a speaker's use of that sentence is both misguided and distorts Cavell and Wittgenstein's claim that "meaning is use." And while there are many questions one might raise here about the "resolute" reading – both as in interpretation of early and late Wittgenstein as well as the role Cavell's texts play in that reading – the point, for our purposes, is the following: Each expansion of an expression into a concrete occasion of use offers (us, creatures like us) a clear sense of what the expression means; but the "expression itself," without any such occasion of use, says nothing determinate but rather hovers between various meanings until there emerges a context for its deployment. Whether or not we want to take the further step and call such indeterminate meanings "plain nonsense" is not something we need to take a stance on here.

Before moving onto the next section, it is worth addressing a possible objection. It might be said that there is something unique about Conant's (or Putnam's) example ("there is a lot of coffee on the table") which distinguishes it from other possible expressions, such as those which we believe can only entertain a single meaning. If Conant's thought holds, however, we should be able to find multiple determinate meanings for even these expressions; if we believe the expression has just *one* meaning, that is because we have one context and one context *only* in mind (thus illustrating what Cavell would call conformity, which is both conformity of thought and of language use).

Let's take as an example the banal phrase "cash or credit." The immediate connotation suggests a monetary exchange of services: "will you be paying by cash or credit card?" However, let's imagine two friends preparing for a weekend trip, and, busy packing side-by-side, one says to the other, "cash or credit?" Here, the thought which is

expressed might be: "what kind of currency should we take?" Or perhaps there is an expressly non-monetary exchange of services, like a son or daughter caring for a sick, aging parent. In jest, the father asks the son, after being served a meal, "cash or credit?" Here the expressed thought may be a declaration of gratitude and a purposeful, joking contrast between care for family and the monetary exchange of goods. Finally, as Cora Diamond points out, the determinate things we can say or mean with a string of words also increases drastically if we allow "cash or credit" to form *part* of a sentence rather than the whole: "I thought it might be a good idea to bring either cash or credit, but it turns out they didn't ask for any money!" As such, Wittgenstein's suggestion that "how a sentence is meant can be expressed by an expansion of it"[64] holds up even under some of what I think would be the most unfavorable conditions: an expression whose meaning seems to be entirely fixed, independent of use.

In sum, we have aimed to differentiate, in Conant's reading of Cavell, between (1) asking after the meaning of particular words or sentences "in isolation from their concrete uses," and (2) asking after the meaning of an expression when a human being has meant or said something by that expression. The next section furthers the inquiry of this chapter by asking, more specifically, what difference does this distinction make? By way of response, I suggest that, for Cavell and Conant, the difference hinges on the presence or absence of the language-user's *reasons* for using language; or, in other words her finite, value-laden cares or commitments.[65]

[64] Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein," 61. Quoting Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §349.
[65] See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging."

Conant and Cavell on Language Idling and "Metaphysical" Uses of Language

Let's return, once more, to Cavell's famous passage from *The Claim of Reason*. In its full iteration, Cavell not only connects Wittgenstein's claim that "meaning is use" to the specific occasion of use of an expression by a language-user, but also to what he calls the *point* of an expression:

> The meaning is the use" calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or say on specific occasions by human being. That such an obvious fact should assume the importance it does is itself surprising. And to trace the intellectual history of philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. It is a concentration one of whose consequences is the traditional search for the meaning of a word in various realms of objects…A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human.
>
> Wittgenstein's motive…is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy…He undertook, as I read him, to trace the mechanisms of this rejection in the ways in which, in investigating ourselves, we are led to speak 'outside language games,' consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have…What is left out of an expression if it is used 'outside its ordinary language game' is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.
>
> …What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean.[66]

What does it mean to have a *point* for an expression? In many ways Cavell has already answered the question: "What is left out of an expression if it is used 'outside its ordinary language game' is not necessarily what the *words* mean…but what we mean in using them when and where we do."[67] The way Conant interprets the difference – between (1) what the words mean, and (2) what *we* mean by them – is in part by showing that the meaning

[66] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 206-207.
[67] Ibid., 207

of (1) is indeterminate while the meaning of (2) is determinate. *How* he does so is another question.

If we link this passage with section one of this chapter, we can say that the difference which Conant elaborates on (between (1) The meaning of the string of individual words which compose the sentence and (2) the meaning supplied on a concrete occasion of speaking) are not *just* expansions of the meaning of an expression. The determinate meanings supplied by expansions of expressions also reveal the kind of constraints that Cavell's Wittgenstein takes (human) understanding to be subject to – namely, that in each case there is a *point* to the determinate expression, a voicing of care and commitment. If we go back to the expansions of the sentence "there is coffee on the table" we might now notice that, in each expansion, there is a particular, human, *point* for saying each of the things we said: a demand that you pour me coffee, a loving cue that there's coffee ready, a helpful or neutral letting-you-know you've spilled coffee, and so forth. Each of these "points" gives voice to a particular language user's interpersonal cares and commitments – to command someone else to do something, to offer a loving gesture, to direct the listener's attention to something, etc. – at a particular time and place. By "expanding" an expression and offering a determinate meaning, then, we have also shown that an expression without a particular human *point* hovers indeterminately between meanings while an expression *with* a particular human point achieves determinate meaning.

I am trying to bring out the sense in which what Cavell calls the "point" for an expression is not a limitation but a limit, not a barrier but a constraint. On Cavell's reading, Wittgenstein ultimately wants to ask what "understanding" or "meaning" is in the absence of human reasons for bringing a string of words to life. Each of the indefinite

number of determinate meanings which a sentence can take up – each *point* it can achieve in an indefinite number of contexts spoken by a particular language-user – is a limitation but also a *condition*, and insofar as we can't transcend those conditions (or in many cases, change them) they must be accepted. Accordingly, analyzing semantic expressions outside of concrete occasions of their use now seems to amount to a rejection of those ordinary forms of human life in which an expression gains *significance* – the ways in which *do* find things interesting or abhorrent or amusing, care one another, and so forth, in and through our relation to and use of words. If we accept this, then the very thing that we are inclined to think of as an *impediment* to meaning – our value-laden cares and commitments, our investments to one thing rather than another, as manifested in the "point" of an expression – is in fact necessary for it.

In the same paper on Wittgenstein we have just been analyzing, Conant, reading Cavell, links the effort to understand the meaning of an expression absent any concrete occasion of use with Wittgenstein's notion of "language idling":

> In *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein describes what is happening when we "speak outside language games" as cases of language 'idling' or 'being on holiday' because he takes the words we call upon in such cases to fail to engage – and thus fail to be at work in – any actual circumstances of use.[68]

Language idles, Conant writes, when it fails to be at work in "any actual circumstance of use": without specific contexts like those provided for the sentence "there is a lot of coffee on the table," language hovers idly, means nothing determinate.. As we've seen, there is nothing determinate that the expression "there is coffee on the table" could mean on its own, in isolation from any concrete occasion of its utterance. There is no *content* (no

[68] Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," 248.

"what" as in "what did you say?") before the whole sense of the expression has been provided.

The metaphor of language-idling returns us to the distinction formulated at the start of this chapter: to the absence of any sense at all, rather than to the failure of instrumental use. One way of reading Cavell's view of the "metaphysical" is that it is a product of examining these non-functional uses of language, or of examining language when it is in this non-functional state. Sketching a concrete occasion of use for an expression is more than just expanding on what is meant: it is also a reminder, a rough method, for transfiguring a sentence from metaphysical allure to ordinary use.

If Cavell is right, then Wittgenstein is not equating "language-idling" and "metaphysical" uses of language, but rather is suggesting that the enticement of metaphysics is to a significant degree the product of looking at sentences external to the meaningful, concrete, occasions of their use. This may be why Wittgenstein thinks a way of eliding the urge to the "metaphysical" is a return to ordinary language. This is not to say that all instances of language idling or speaking outside language games are metaphysical or vice versa, but it does suggest that expanding a sentence into a concrete use is one method of returning words "from their metaphysical to their everyday use."

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the Cavellian problem concerns characterizing the kind of 'meaning' appropriate to finite linguistic creatures who have inherited a language which is constantly undergoing change but who are nevertheless able to operate with words successfully. With some idea now in place about what an *inappropriate* conception of meaning might be, I want to say a few things now about what an *appropriate* conception would be, on Cavell's view, of concept-use and determinant

meaning for a finite creature who has inherited language. As we will see, the use or "projection" of a word into a new context is both constrained *and* open-ended; the constraint and the open-endedness are interlinked aspects of the same finite capacity.

Projection and Intersubjectivity

In a well-known passage from *The Claim of Reason,* Cavell writes:

> …any form of life and every concept integral to it has an indefinite number of instances and directions of projection; and…this variation is not arbitrary. *Both* the "outer" variance and the "inner" constancy are necessary if a concept is to accomplish its tasks – of meaning, understanding, communication, etc., and in general, guiding us through the world, and relating thought and action and feeling to the world….
>
> … to say that a word or concept has a (stable) meaning is to say that new and the most various instances can be recognized as falling under or failing to fall under that concept; to say that a concept must be tolerant is to say that were we to assign a new word to "every" new instances, no word would have the kind of meaning or power a word [has]. Or: there would *be* no instances, and hence no concepts either.[69]

If we can understand what Cavell is trying to say here about the fact that and the way in which concept-use is both constrained *and* open-ended, we will have some idea of the kind of 'meaning' appropriate to language-users who have inherited language, but who nevertheless have room to negotiate the boundaries of the linguistic concepts which preexist the life of any individual person.

Stephen Mulhall has analyzed this passage both in his book-length study on Cavell (a book which still sets the terms of much Cavell scholarship) as well as a chapter in a

[69] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 185–86.

more recent edited volume.[70] Without doing justice, by any means, to Mulhall's treatment of it, I do want to begin from Mulhall's thought that for Cavell it is a mistake to think about the twin aspects of concept use described in the passage – 'outer' variance and 'inner' constancy – as separate or even separable "fundamental facts" which are in tension with one another, [71] Mulhall posits instead that both the internal constancy and the outward variance of a concept are, for Cavell, "two aspects of a single or singular fact"[72] – that understanding Cavell's view "is a matter of showing that and how the kind of normativity [concepts] exemplify enables or rather constitutes…freedom of judgement."[73]

To better understand this radical idea, let's take Cavell's well-known example of the concept of "feed." Cavell wants to show that both (a) the use of feed in *just any* context, and (b) the use of feed in just *one* kind of context would strangle the differences – and the similarities – between "feeding a kitty," "feeding a lion," "feeding your pride," and so forth, ultimately leading to a total disintegration of the concept:

> We learn the use of 'feed the kitty', 'feed the lion', 'feed the swans', and one day one of us says 'feed the meter', or 'feed in the film', or 'feed the machine', or 'feed his pride', or 'feed wire', and we understand, we are not troubled. Of course we could, in most of these cases, use a different word, not attempt to project or transfer "feed" from contexts like "feed the monkey" into contexts like "feed the machine". But what should be gained if we did? And what would be lost?[74]

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[70] I have in mind both Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Stephen Mulhall, "Inner Constancy, Outer Variation: Stanley Cavell on Grammar, Criteria, and Rules" in *Varieties of Skepticism: Chapters After Kant, Wittgenstein, and Cavell*, eds. James Conant and Andrea Kern, 291–311 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).
[71] Mulhall, "Inner Constancy, Outer Variation," 304.
[72] Ibid., 304
[73] Ibid., 310. Or as Jose Medina puts the same point, with a slightly different emphasis, in a paper on Wittgenstein: "normative authority is always subject to contestation," since it is part of the very nature of regularizable conceptual activity to be open to new instances of that activity. See Jose Medina, "Wittgenstein as a Rebel: Dissidence and Contestation in Discursive Practices," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010), 1–29. "Normative practices," Medina writes, "are always in principle open to the contestation and renegotiation of standards" (ibid., 2).
[74] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 81.

The question is what constrains – while simultaneously leaving open – the employment or use of the word. One response might be that, in learning the use of a word like "feed," what we learn is a rule or definition, and we then apply this rule to each potential instance of its expression: if the possible instance (of x) fits the rule or concept (of x), then we can say it is an instance of the concept.[75]

However, to understand Cavell we must understand that this approach does not in fact do any *explaining*; the concept of a "rule" can at best be an afterthought, a description of a "natural capacity" that proceeds in precisely this way.[76] In other words, the "rule" does not answer the question of what "it" is which allows us to see and attach similarities between "*feeding* the kitty" and "*feeding* his pride." The explanatory appeal to a rule here does nothing more than *describe* the phenomena, insofar as the rule merely restates the fact that these (different) instances are counted under the same concept. Indeed, the turn toward rules to explain the projection of words into new contexts bears similarities to the appeal, described earlier, to look to any given empirical use of a word to explain what its "meaning" is (following Wittgenstein's claim that "the meaning is the use"). In both cases, there is an identity relation between two entities (in the one case "meaning" and "use" and in the second case a rule and its application) whose content has not yet been established. At best, both explanations are unsatisfying; at worst, I suggest, they *cover over* something.

If this is right, then what is being covered over? The question puts us in a region of Cavell's philosophy which seems both deceptively simple and terrifyingly difficult;

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[75] The language of "instance of the concept" or "instance of a concept" is Cavell's, for example, in *The Claim of Reason,* "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language."
[76] Cf. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 37.

namely, that what allows us to go on with both constancy and variance in using concepts is not grasping rules but *sharing* – or the potential for sharing – intersubjective practices and forms of life into which we are initiated. To illustrate this point, Cavell describes a child learning language and suggests, famously, that there is no guarantee that she will be initiated into language successfully. There is no guarantee, in other words, that in learning language will find the same things worth doing and noticing and eating and smelling and talking about and listening to and sharing with others:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules) just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism that Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.[77]

Perhaps the most striking philosophical claim here is that, for Cavell, ordinary meaningful concept use depends neither on a relation to reality nor on the grasping of a concept or universal, but rather on something like the acceptance of and participation in shared activities or practices (finding the same things worth doing and taking about, sharing "routes of interest and feeling").[78] Commenting on this passage, and specifically on Cavell's claim that neither "the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules" will help us understand what allows to go on or project a concept into new contexts, John McDowell describes a sense of "vertigo" we may feel:

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[77] Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 44–72 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52.
[78] Ibid., 52.

> … there is nothing that keeps our practices in line except the reactions and responses we learn in learning them. The ground seems to have been removed from under our feet…What Cavell offers looks, rather, like *a congruence of subjectivities*, not grounded as it would need to be to amount to the sort of objectivity we want if we are to be convinced that we are really going on in the same way.[79]

These shared practices form a ground, but they do not form a ground in the same way that a staunch realist would purport to ground our propositions, say, in a relation of correspondence with reality. The Cavellian ground of meaning is an ungrounded ground, a "thin net over an abyss."[80] If what keeps our linguistic and conceptual practices in line is neither the grasping of a rule under which we "fit" individuals or particular instances nor "an agreement with reality," but rather a congruence of individual subjectivities, then, as McDowell notes, this will amount to a *transformation*, but not abandonment, of the concept of "objectivity." Cavellian/Wittgensteinian intersubjective practices are "objective" in the sense that they are binding on meaningful language use – they are constraints on the kinds of things we might use a string of words to say, for example – but they are not objective in the scientific realist's sense; they are objective in a way which incorporates and does not discount particular subjectivities.

Nonetheless, we are liable here, too, to fall into a misunderstanding: To say that objectivity is grounded in intersubjective shared practices may imply that we *decide* what is true or false, as if meaning were a function of mere conventionality. That such a conception of "conventionality" does not do the work we need it to is clear, since I do not "decide" that leaving a bunch of carrots in my brother's room does not count as feeding him just as I do not "decide" that flattering him *does* count as "feeding his pride," even if

[79] McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule Following," 44.
[80] See Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

the first involves food and the second involves words. "Since we cannot assume that the words we are given have their meaning by nature, we are led to assume they take it from convention; and yet no current idea of 'convention' could seem to do the work that words do…We *cannot* have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary," Cavell writes.[81] "This means," as Sandra Laugier puts it, "that we are not agents of the agreement, that language precedes this agreement as much as it is produced by it."[82] Rather, in learning a language, we both make use of and develop a capacity to be attuned to these social agreements.

Conclusion

As I have explored in this chapter, there are two senses or extensions of the driving claim – that our subjective, value-laden cares and commitments are a condition for objectivity – under discussion here. The first is that, in order for a disembodied and context-less string of words to become a determinant meaningful expression, there has to be a *point* to the expression, a reason why we take up those words and use them as we do: to point something out to another, to instruct, chastise, praise, pick on, and so forth. The second, and perhaps more conceptually difficult but no less significant, is that the successful employment or use of words for finite creatures like us in fact *rests* on the 'subjective' qualities of our nature: our "routes of interest and feeling," our sense of "what is outrageous…what a rebuke, what forgiveness" is.[83] By recognizing both, we arrive at the possibility – by no means the guarantee – of forming intersubjective communities, whose shared practices and shared senses of what is worth maintaining

[81] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 31.
[82] Sandra Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as Politics of the Ordinary," *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015), 230.
[83] Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," 52.

are the only promise that we have for the continued use and significance of a concept in the future. Cavell's world is a world of radical contingency, and "[h]uman speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this."[84]

[84] Ibid., 52.

CHAPTER 2

Towards Leading the Correspondence Theory of Meaning Back to Earth: *Cavell at Criticism*

In this chapter I apply what I take to be a program of Cavellian criticism to the view, as expressed by Augustine in the opening to the *Investigations,* that the meaning of a word is the object in the world for which that word stands. By a "Cavellian program of criticism" I mean Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's famous dictum that "what *we* do is lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[85] Applied to the idea that the meaning of a word is the object which corresponds to it, Cavell's criticism shows us, not that such an idea is false, impractical, or even "overly general," but that it is a confusion. As a confusion, as a kind of "fantasy" of the way concepts work, it cannot be fully described or defined, as there is no "it" to fully define. When in the grip of such a picture of language, we must be led, guided, out from it, as if out of Plato's Cave.

It is tempting, in my case at least, when thinking of the correspondence relation, to think that:

(1) either a use of language is governed by the correspondence relation, or it is not.

This seems to be a straightforward application of the law of excluded middle. How could things, logically, be otherwise? But I will ultimately defend the claim that (1) is, in fact, false. If we fully think through what it means to inherit language as a set of social

[85] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §116. This sentence, especially in Cavell's later work, becomes something of a methodological shorthand for the indirect process necessary to show the skeptic (in us) that their philosophical reflection has lost touch with the world he set out to start reflecting on, and appears unable to get back into view.

practices and activities, then, following Cavell, it becomes clear that the correspondence theory of meaning is neither a true *nor* a false theory, but a confusion, an obfuscation of our ordinary life with concepts. And if this is true then (1) is false. The possibilities (1) envisions are not, in fact, possibilities at all.

Neither Wittgenstein nor Cavell deny that we can word the world successfully; the problem occurs when we acquire a misleading idea of what it means to do this. The correspondence relation misconstrues the constraints that reality places on our life with concepts, locating them "outside" of linguistic use, as if we were looking upon our life with language from a position outside of that life, when in fact the constraints are internal to that use. If we understand Wittgenstein's claim that correspondence between word and world has a home in various practices and activities with words, then this pluralizes and makes the correspondence relation so heterogeneous that, we find, the apparent inevitability of the logical law has lost its grip.

Oddly enough, I start by talking about the way rules function in tennis.

Language (and) Games

In learning a competitive game, in being initiated into the practice of playing a competitive game, we learn a body of predefined rules. There are referees and officials, trained by an international tennis organization, who are experts in those rules. To learn tennis, for example, to be initiated into the "social practice" of tennis, one has to learn a body of rules for the game, rules which for the most part existed prior to our participation in them.[86]

[86] It may also be important, for a professional player at least, to have knowledge of the way in which those rules can be changed. But the point is that *those* rules, the rules for changing the rules, are also, with some

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, it is important to see the sense in which those rules, which we inherit as players of the game, both constrain what can and cannot be done in the game *and* leave room for freedom and spontaneity of action. If, in tennis, there weren't an indefinite number of shots one could hit which did not violate the rules, then there would not be enough variation to make it an interesting or competitive game. Conversely, if *every* shot were allowed, then there would *be* nothing which we'd count *as* tennis: if doubles lines were indiscriminately used for singles and doubles, there would be nothing which would count as singles, for example. In tennis, then, there is much the rules allow for *and* much they do not.[87] Without proscribing some things and allowing others, there would be nothing that would *be* (called) singles in tennis, or doubles in tennis. Without something which would count as breaking the rule, we lose hold on what it means to say there's a "rule" operating at all.

So, in a sense, the constraints actually make freedom possible. The rules of a game are indeterminate but not, by any means, completely so.[88] They are open-ended but not, by any means, entirely so. The constraints are what make room not only for innovation, but also for there being such a thing *as* playing *that* game as opposed to playing another game. We might say: the actions of a game like tennis are bounded, but not always *determined* by rules. And in this vein, we can think about the interplay of constraint and freedom – or what we might call the *determinacy of rules* – on a

exceptions, predefined – they exist already, too. In the philosophy of law, such a notion of laws or rules for changing the rules are often called "secondary rules," after, I believe, H.L.A.'s formulation of such an idea of "primary and secondary rules." See H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[87] Martin Gustaffson's work has been invaluable for clarifying this point for me. See, in particular, Martin Gustaffson, "Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples," *Inquiry* 48, no. 4 (2005), 356–89.

[88] Again, see Gustaffson's work on Cavell, including "Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples," for a particularly clear clarification of this point.

spectrum. Sometimes, a rule may be very "strict": we may find it nearly *impossible* to do more than one thing which is in accord with the rule. In other cases, rules are looser, such that if a great variety of things were *not* allowed by the rule, then the game would lose its point or purpose. We might call this latter case, where indeterminacy is part of what it means to *follow* a rule, a case of circumscribing a *field* of actions by a rule.

For Wittgenstein, as for Cavell, there is much to be gained from an analogy between the "social practice" of games and language use. Indeed, a significant part of book one of the *Investigations* — the only book Wittgenstein had in any meaningful sense completed before his death — is devoted to the notion of *language-games*. These passages weave in and out of a discussion of language and a discussion of games, leading to the coining of Wittgenstein's famous concept of "language-games."

One thing that the analogy between games and linguistic concepts is supposed to highlight is the role and nature of rules. For games as for linguistic concepts, there is the sense of both constraint and freedom that the rules of the practice make possible. In the case of tennis, again, the game would certainly not be worth watching or competing in if rules were so determinate as to compel or demand that each action was dictated by the rules – there would no room for the players to *play,* as opposed to merely following orders. Yet neither does the "looseness" of the rules mean that *any* action will result in winning points; if *anything* could count here, then we would again lose hold of necessary concepts such as "aces," "scoring," "singles" and "doubles," etc. Thus, even in these "looser" cases, even on the indeterminate end of the spectrum, there must also be constraint, or else there is nothing to distinguish one concept from another. In other words, if *everything* counted as playing tennis, then nothing would count *as* "playing

tennis" – as opposed to playing backgammon or hitting a ball against the wall or calling up my brother in Santa Fe.

Rules in a game, then, like linguistic concepts, must walk a delicate tightrope between constraint, on the one hand, and spontaneity and freedom, on the other hand. But somewhat counterintuitively, this is the case also for rules which circumscribe a broad field of actions. For Wittgenstein, it is easy to lose track of the way in which rules form a kind of tightrope that we walk between constraint and freedom. And for Cavell, I think, we actively *rebel* against these constraints; there is a part of us that actively seeks to transcend or avoid them. And if one can get a sense for the difficulty of this reality—if one can acquire a sense of how easy it might be to lose track of this idea—then one can get a sense of the difficulty of doing Cavellian philosophy.

In this vein, while discussing some of the connections between games and rules, Wittgenstein imagines what I take to be a children's recess:

> We can easily imagine people amusing ourselves in a field by playing with a ball like this: starting various existing games, but playing several without finishing them, and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball…throwing it at one another for a joke, and so on.[89]

If Wittgenstein is in fact describing children here, then the children have not yet been fully initiated into the rules of the game in which they are playing. (Or perhaps some *could* fully play the ball games, in other contexts, say with adults around, but around other children they would prefer to just run around, screaming, laughing, playing – as kids do). In cases of children playing, imitating, amusing, etc., the constraints which make possible full participation in the game have not yet been fully grasped. There is a sense in which the adult question of *what* the children are doing – what they are doing

[89] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §83.

in a more specific sense, of course, than "playing with balls" – is not a very good question, perhaps not even a coherent one. The children may be bouncing tennis balls, going through motions they watched their parents perform, and even trying to hit a forehand past an opponent on the other side of the net; but they may lack, for example, the capacity to keep score or an understanding of the relevant activities and concepts. But of course there is a sense in which we could count the children's' activities as "playing a game." The Wittgensteinian point here is not to legislate what counts as playing a game or not, but to call attention to the conceptual difference between what an adult, as a master of language use, would call playing basketball, playing tennis, and so forth, and the child's "in-between space" of playing.

In other words, the children are not yet successful *initiates* – to use Cavell's concept – into the rules of the games they are playing; they do not yet have the required experience with concepts which would make what they are doing count – or *not* count – *as* playing basketball or tennis, backgammon – or as the negation, as *not* doing so. The thought is that the children are neither "playing basketball," as we adults say, nor *not* "playing basketball" (assuming that by the latter we still mean the negation of the former). It is not *false* to say of the children that they are "playing basketball," but it is not true, either. The children have a different concept, and a strange one for us adults, of playing these games.

For the moment I will put aside the question of children and turn instead to how this discussion of games, concepts, and language use, can relatedly be applied to skepticism. On the one hand, both the child and the skeptic act as if they were not initiated into the relevant social practices and activities which make meaningful language use possible. On the other hand, the skeptic and the child do so for different

reasons: The children are *playing*, they are in between the adult world and the children's world, and so the adult concepts are not quite yet the right ones to use. But the skeptic is very much *not* playing – he is, for example, "examining our most deeply held beliefs" – and yet here, too, the adult concepts do not quite seem to be the right ones to use. For the skeptic, I will suggest below, the constraints guiding concept use, guiding linguistic meaning, and making meaning possible, have been run up against, like a bump on the head, and rejected. The consequence for the skeptic is not unconstrained freedom, but conceptual life without internal constraint which, as we saw above, is nothingness, meaninglessness, since there would be nothing to distinguish one action from another.

In the next section, I want to compare the rough schematic of language acquisition just articulated –that learning language is being initiated into social practices and activities – with the famous "Augustinian" theory of language and language acquisition that opens the *Investigations*. Once the distinction between the two has been examined, we can better understand Cavell's claim, that the skeptic needs to be *led* back to the ordinary constraints guiding (but not determining) fields of concept use, but this is not a function of claiming that something the skeptic says is false.

The Augustinian Picture of the Essence of Language

In the opening passage of the *Investigations,* St. Augustine, in many ways the most important Church father for Christian metaphysical doctrine, famously describes what he takes to be a memory of his learning his native language. Every philosopher for whom Wittgenstein's text has meant a great deal has felt the need to interpret this passage, and I am no exception.

Augustine says that, in learning language, he "learned to understand what things the words" signified by the adults who were using them represented, learned to "grasp that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered."[90] In other words, Augustine says that in learning language he learned the names of *particular objects* in the world signified by the sounds the adults made.

This seems simple enough. We might not even pause at it while reading *The Confessions*. But according to Cavell, it will take Wittgenstein much of the rest of the text to show why this way of thinking about *language as correspondence* between word and world is so distorting. For Wittgenstein, the Augustinian "picture of the essence of human language" looks like this:

> …the words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. In this picture [Bild] of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands."[91]

In a word, this makes the basis of language a correspondence or reference relation between language ("sounds") and the world ("objects"). For the Augustinian, language is a system built upon correspondence between words and their meanings; "meanings" are the objects in the world. Language is thus a system of reference, where a word's referent is the object in the world to which it corresponds.

The very first response Wittgenstein gives to the Augustinian is that someone in the grip of such a picture must be thinking "primarily of nouns like 'table,' 'chair,' 'bread,' and people's names."[92] If meanings are objects in the world, then nouns are a good candidate. But, Wittgenstein continues, the Augustinian must be thinking "only

[90] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself."[93] The question of reference with regard to adjectives, verbs, pronouns, etc., is much more obscure. Importantly, Wittgenstein seems to make this remark in passing – he brings it up only to immediately drop it – in order to show that, even for *nouns* the question of correspondence between words and world needs to be reframed. As Cavell writes:

> Augustine's description, it emerges, is not 'all right as far as it goes,' even about nouns and proper names. It contains assumptions or pictures about teaching, learning, pointing, naming – say these are modes of establishing a connection between language and the world – which prove to be empty, that is, which give us the illusion of providing explanations. [94]

This is typically murky and apparently obscure Cavellian language, but in what follows I will try and unpack Cavell's claim here, that the idea that learning language is learning a correspondence relation between word and objects "give[s] us the *illusion of providing explanations."*

The immediate force of the concept of illusion is that we are in some sense satisfied with explaining language acquisition in the Augustinian way, as mastering a kind of correspondence relation. After all, this is a very intuitive way to think about language, perhaps especially for philosophers. But Wittgenstein, Cavell writes, wants to show us that our apparent satisfaction is mistaken, and he does so by asking us, indirectly, what would *exemplify* such a picture. This is a key methodological principle for Wittgenstein and for Cavell. To quote the second part of the epigraph of this

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Cf. Stanley Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of the *Philosophical Investigations"* in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein,* eds. Hans Sluga and David G. Stern, 245–80 *(*New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 266. "Augustine's description, it emerges, is not 'all right as far as it goes,' even about nouns and proper names. It contains assumptions or pictures about teaching, learning, pointing, naming – say these are modes of establishing a connection between language and the world – which prove to be empty, that is, which give us the illusion of providing explanations."

dissertation: "the best I can propose," Wittgenstein writes, "is that we yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate what the *application* of the picture looks like."[95] Wittgenstein aims to show us that our apparent conviction in the explanation provided by the Augustinian picture of language acquisition is illusory – such a picture does not *explain* language at all. In a word, as I will make clearer a bit later on, what's at stake here is the Cavellian idea that something – a "philosophical idea" – is at *home* somewhere, somewhere *other* than where the Augustinian *thinks* it is. So, Cavellian philosophy is a way of leading (back) to a new home, a place we have never been.

In this sense it is significant, though still often missed by commentators, that Wittgenstein first offers one description or anecdote that is supposed to exemplify the Augustinian theory of language, only, in the next section, to retract it, replacing it with another. The first description Wittgenstein offers is often called the "five red apples" story and the second is called "the builders," both of which are examined below in turn.[96]

1. Now think of the following use [Verwendung] of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip of paper marked "five red apples." He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples"; then he looks up the word "red" in a chart and finds a colour sample next to it; then he says the series of elementary number-words – I assume he knows them by heart – up to the word "five", and for each number-word he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.[97]

[95] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §374,
[96] The fact that there are two different stories or descriptions offered which are supposed to exemplify the Augustinian picture is often missed by Wittgenstein's commentators, though it is not missed by Cavell. If we think about the *Investigations* as what Cavell calls a "perfectionist" text – a text the reader is supposed to wrestle with and work through, sympathize with the claims put forth even by the skeptical interlocutors, and come away having understood things a little differently – then it will be important to understand why Wittgenstein first offers us one description (the five red apples story) which is supposed to exemplify the Augustinian picture, and then offers us another (the builders story).
[97] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.

Notice, first, that this banal example – someone has sent someone else shopping – immediately throws us into what we called in the last chapter a concrete occasion of *use* for the words "five red apples" – a specific occasion of use in which one human being is saying something with these words. Notice, too, that what's in question are the meanings of three words (nouns*)* – "five red apples." Insofar as the passage is about the meanings of these three nouns, it is supposed to be exactly the kind of thing that the person in the grips of the Augustinian picture was thinking about: that for each noun there is a corresponding meaning which is also its object in the world.

Yet, in carrying out the order and in understanding these three words, the shopkeeper is following some sort of rule*,* comparing each word against something else, as in a table or chart. Wittgenstein's overly explicit and weird little story is supposed to prompt a question: The shopkeeper does not open just *any* drawer, but the drawer marked "apples." So, the shopkeeper had to "look" somewhere to know what apples "meant." But here, too, he doesn't take out just *any* kind of apples, but only *red* apples, the correct kind. And to know what red "means," too, he had to "look somewhere" – didn't he? Where did he look? Wittgenstein mentions a "chart" or a "table" (*einer Tabelle*), but what kind of chart? Did the shopkeeper momentarily forget what red meant and have to consult a chart hanging up at the register? (If so, that would make him a pretty poor choice for a shopkeeper.) Or was the chart inside his head, so that he had a kind of private ostensive definition of red against which he compared the word "red"? And as for the last word – "five" – the shopkeeper doesn't take out just any number of red apples, but only *five* red apples. How does he know how many five are, what "five" means? Where is the chart, the table, the standard – where is the *rule* – according to which the shopkeeper can assess whether he takes out the right number of

apples? With these questions, perhaps, we can start to understand Cavell's claim that, in Wittgenstein's great work of philosophy, the very opening passage contains the entire "flowering of concepts" of the text as a whole.

Having brought us to the place where he can raise these difficulties, Wittgenstein does not make things any easier for us. Instead, immediately following the "five red apples" story, he gives voice to numerous different responses to it, with numerous interlocutors, each of which seems to be in conversation with the others, without specifying which one is "himself."

> – It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. – "But how does he know when and he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" – Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. – But what is he meaning of the word 'five"? No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used.[98]

As Toril Moi has recently written[99], it may be something of a joke that Wittgenstein would tell his readers, in the very first section of the book, that "explanations come to an end somewhere."[100] If Wittgenstein is not going to offer an *explanation* of how the shopkeeper knew what these words mean, of the table or rule with which the shopkeeper compared the words to the objects, then what will the rest of the *Investigations* offer?

The point is: if this story is supposed to exemplify, or be an application of, the Augustinian picture of language acquisition, then it in fact raises more questions than it answers. Nouns were supposed to be the easy case, but *against* what does the

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[98] Ibid., § 1
[99] See Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), Part 1: Wittgenstein. Moi's discussion of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is very much in the background of this discussion, as is Stephen Mulhall's in his *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
[100] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* § 1.

shopkeeper check the meaning of words? How does he know that these words refer to *these* objects, and not others?

Wittgenstein doesn't answer these questions. Instead, as if performing the realization that these questions are suddenly too complex for the apparently simple idea that the Augustinian theory proposes, Wittgenstein *corrects* himself, as it were, replacing the five red apples story with a completely different one. In other words, Wittgenstein says that the "five red apples" story, actually, *isn't* the best way to capture the representational theory of language which Augustine describes.

> 2. That [Augustine's] philosophical notion of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also instead say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours.
>
> Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right: the language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones; there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass him the stones and to do so in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they make use a language consisting of the words "block, "pillar," "slab," "beam." A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has leant to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive of this as a complete primitive language.[101]

More nouns. And now, in fact, a primitive language – a basic case – consisting *only* of nouns. If these four words really do encompass the builder's language, then Augustine's description – that the meaning of a word is the object in the world for which it stands – seems to be accurate.

But, as many critics have noted, I believe following Cavell, one question Wittgenstein wants us to ask is whether *what* the builders have – four words, and the ability to order and heed orders – is a "language."[102] The reference relation is still

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[101] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §2.

[102] An essay that is at the root of the "New Wittgenstein" reading and which most Wittgensteinians seem to cite without actually discussing in detail – as if it were too important and too foundational to be made explicit without distorting – is Warren D. Goldfarb's "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the

inscribed within something like a recognizably human purpose for them – labor – even if we can't tell what the larger context is. And as soon as we start to imagine the builders as *people,* the question of whether this apparently "pure" exemplification of the Augustinian theory starts to crumble. For if we imagine the builders' circumstances, wouldn't we immediately wonder why the builders don't also have words for greeting each other, for eating and for finding food, for cleaning – never mind for geometry, love, and painting? In other words, where are the builder's *other* activities, practices, and human forms of life? Do the builders *have* these other practices and activities, and simply do not *talk* in them? (Would they then be human?) More fundamentally, is it even possible to imagine a group of humans who have been taught nothing more than the words for certain construction materials and how to follow and give orders? Of course, in some sense, it is. At one level Wittgenstein depicts a picture or allegory of forced labor. But in another sense, this could *not* be a complete (human) language, because for linguistic creatures like us, we would also need words to facilitate, improve upon, discuss, etc.; eating, cleaning, caring, etc.; for one another, with one another, etc. Even in the case of forced labor, one can imagine what laborers might have done when out of sight of their masters or employers – *and this field of linguistic-conceptual human possibility* is what makes the builders' case distinct from a truly "human" one.

We are still left with a question, however: why would Wittgenstein first give us a story – the "five red apples" – that purports to illustrate the Augustinian picture of

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Opening Section of the *Philosophical Investigations," Synthese* 56 (1983): 265–82. Goldfarb is concerned to show in that paper that various philosophical accounts we might give of the "metaphysical foundations" for language – that thinking is an independent process on top of which language lies, that there is a fully extended or perform form of every sentence of our language on top of which language lies, that language actually consists of contrasts between words and it is these contrasts which make meaningful use possible – are ultimately dissatisfying.

language, and then say that it doesn't actually illustrate it? Why then follow it with another story, rather than giving us just the one? The answer, I think, is that Wittgenstein aims to unseat our sense of the profundity of Augustine's theory of language and "relocate" it to a place where we haven't thought to look.[103] The way I read the two stories which open the *Investigations* is not that the "five red apples" story is a *wrong* or *false* illustration of the Augustinian picture of language while the "builders' story is the right illustration. Rather, I think that Wittgenstein aims to show the Augustinian that his simplistic account of meaning as correspondence between word and world does not actually *explain* meaning, but merely restates, in a philosophical way, what is internal to social-linguistic practice or activity.[104]

To understand this better, we can turn to a close reading of the key sentence which begins the passage quoted above, which marks the transition between the five red apples and builder stories. The sentence is very carefully composed and very complex. Even the revised Hacker and Shulte translation does not quite capture the German. Anscombe's original translation is:

> That [Augustine's] philosophical notion of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions.

The Hacker/Shulte translation gets it a little better, substituting "is at home" for "in its place."

> That philosophical notion of meaning is at home in a primitive idea of the way language functions.

But neither do justice to the carefully worded original:

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[103] Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §52.
[104] Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts," 266.

> Jener philosophische Begriff der Bedeutung ist in einer primitiven Vorstellung von der Art und Weise, wie die Sprache funktioniert, zu Hause.[105]

Translated literally, the sentence would be:

> That philosophical notion of meaning is in a primitive idea of the way language functions at home.

What I want to bring out here, again, is the Cavellian idea that something – a "philosophical idea" – is at *home* somewhere, somewhere *other* than where the Augustinian *thinks* it is. This sentence, the very first sentence Wittgenstein writes after presenting the Augustinian picture, foreshadows the sentence made famous by Cavell, that "what *we* do is lead words from their metaphysical to their everyday use"[106]: the world of our ordinary life with concepts is other than where the philosopher thinks it is.

Let us try to understand this more clearly. With the German in view, it is easier to see the full complexity of the sentence. There are three layers, perspectives, or "forms of representation," all of language: there is the (1) "philosophische Begriff" (translated as *philosophical notion*); but also the (2) "primitiven Vorstellung" (as *primitive idea*) and (3) "wie die Sprache funkioniert, zu Hause" (*the way language functions at home)*. And what Wittgenstein says is that (1) is a consequence of (2)'s distortion of (3). In other words, there is something Wittgenstein thinks we have missed: the way language functions, at home. What has *led* us to miss it is "a primitive idea" of this homely function. The consequence, Wittgenstein suggests, is (3) – the philosophical idea that Augustine proposes, that the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands. In sum, then, we might say that the Augustinian theory of meaning – what we mean when entangled with metaphysics when we say that the meaning of a word is the object it

[105] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §2.
[106] Ibid., §116.

corresponds with – has a role or function in our language which is quite different from the status we are inclined to give it while philosophizing. The Augustinian theory of meaning abstracts – and distorts – the reference relation from its heterogenous uses within various, social activities and practices.

What is the "primitive idea" of the way language functions which leads us to the philosophical notion of meaning? I suggest that it is precisely what the "builders" story shows us, namely, that we are the kinds of creatures who, *for various purposes*, are capable of pointing to, referring to, objects in the world with the same words. This very fact – that we are able to pick out particular slabs, rocks, people, and so forth, using words, in the course of practical activity – would be, on this reading, the "primitive idea" of correspondence. It is "primitive" because it has not gotten into view the fact that, or the way in which, this unusual, biologically unique capacity of ours – to refer to objects, to point to objects in the world, with words – is operationalized in particular human practices, interests, and activities. For example, the capacity to point to objects is part of the language games we play on a construction site. And it is part of – i.e., operationalized in – the language games we play when pointing things out to one another. The difficulty is that linguistic meaning is not *dependent* on a correspondence between word and world for its adequacy in the way we construe this dependency in our philosophizing; the correspondence relation is not the *ground* of meaning in the way we can be led to think it is.

In the next section I try to clarify the claim that the philosophical notion of correspondence between world and world is a distortion of inherited, social practices which operationalize the natural fact of our capacity for reference. I will do so by letting the role of the correspondence relation show itself, free of philosophical requirements,

within our multifaceted, contingent, and social activities or "practices" with words – to follow, in other words, Wittgenstein's guidance that philosophy "leaves everything as it is."

To do this – to look at the use of the correspondence relation in such a way as to leave that use as it is – I propose we look at two well-known sections of the *Lectures on the Foundation of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein's lectures given at Cambridge in 1939, during which Wittgenstein was also drafting what would become part I of the *Investigations*. The relations between the two texts, as we will see, are revealing.[107]

Concept Use as a Technique or Practice

In lecture seven of *Lectures on the Foundation of Mathematics* (*LFM*), Wittgenstein is trying to connect the ordinary use of the words "proof" and "prove" to their use in mathematics. In the context of this discussion of what it means to "prove" a mathematical theorem, and whether such a proof is an invention or a discovery (Wittgenstein will lean toward the former), he at first seems to offer a deflationist or redundancy view of truth, in which "is true" means nothing more or less than "p"[108]:

> …To say proposition *p* is true is just the same as *p*.
> You might say, "Can't we explain what we mean by 'is true'? For example, to say that *p* is true means that it corresponds with reality, or that it is in accordance with reality.[109]

[107] Thanks to Cora Diamond, we have a workable copy of these important lectures. Although an exact transmission of these lectures isn't available, Diamond reconstructed an imperfect copy of them from the notes of those who were present, giving what is generally agreed to be a good enough, if imperfect, picture of what Wittgenstein was up to. In the audience were several faculty and students from around the university, including Norman Malcolm and Alan Turing. Turing, though, was away during the lecture from which the following passage comes. This is not the only place Wittgenstein discusses the correspondence theory of truth in these lectures, but it is a particularly rich discussion.
[108] Wittgenstein, *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge 1939,* ed. Cora Diamond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 67–68. Hereafter "*LFM.*"
[109] Ibid., p. 68

But whatever a deflationist view of truth might exactly amount to[110], we can see from the way Wittgenstein continues in *LFM* that he is denying neither that the correspondence relation has a place in our language nor that we can ever expand on what we mean by "is true" by pointing to a correspondence or agreement between a statement or object and reality. I'll quote the relevant passage in full here to show the transition Wittgenstein makes in his lecture:

> …To say proposition *p* is true is just the same as *p*.
> You might say, "Can't we explain what we mean by 'is true'? For example, to say that *p* is true means that it corresponds with reality, or that it is in accordance with reality.
>
> Saying this ["is true" means "it corresponds with reality"] need not be futile at all. – "What is a good photograph [of a man]?" "One which resembles a man." We explain the words "good photograph" by means of "resemble", etc. This is all right if we know what "resemble" means. But if the technique of comparing the picture with reality hasn't been laid down, if the use of "resembles" isn't clear, then saying this is no use.[111]

As we can see, it's not always the case that "is true" cannot be further unpacked. There are cases, Wittgenstein writes, in which it makes perfect sense to emphasize a statement's correspondence or accordance with reality. If *this* much is taken to be in conflict with a deflationary view of truth or meaning, then Wittgenstein did not hold (that sense of) a deflationary view of meaning. That much is clear.

What is also clear is that Wittgenstein's emphasis is on whether there is *agreement* in something he calls "technique." This may *seem* straightforward enough,

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[110] From this passage it seems like Wittgenstein held a deflationist theory of truth – the view that to say, "p is true" is just to say "p." And it's sometimes claimed (for example in Misak 2016) that Frank Ramsey held a deflationist view of truth, and Wittgenstein inherited this view from Ramsey. Perhaps the deflationist view is taken to be a kind of quietism about what makes a true statement true; or perhaps it's taken to mean that the predicate "is true" doesn't add anything to our conviction in the truth of a statement. But as Cora Diamond (2003) has argued, and the following discussion makes clear, things are much less simple than simply saying that Wittgenstein inherited a redundancy or deflationist view of truth from Ramsey. He certainly learned a lot from Ramsey, but he also did not merely copy Ramsey's views.
[111] Wittgenstein, *LFM,* 68–69.

like the question of whether we agree over the meaning of the term "resembles" in particular cases. If this were all Wittgenstein were saying – that the meaning of the term changes from context to context – he might be called a semantic contextualist or something similar. But this simplicity is misleading. It is not just a question of agreement about what is meant by "resemble" or about the dependence of meaning on context, but instead, the emphasis is on the *nature* and *source* of that agreement: something Wittgenstein's use of the word "technique" is supposed to show. As we will see, the agreement in technique is *social* and *practical*; more like a tacit or implied agreement, similar to rules we "agree to" when playing a game, for example, than an explicit intellectual agreement such as a contract.[112] As we might put it: there is agreement in language, but we have not *agreed* on that agreement.[113]

Agreements are in a way relative to "practice," but we have to be very clear not to think that all practices are the same.[114] Within a practice, agreement in technique may be effectively established – checking IDs at an airport for example. When a TSA agent checks an ID, it is more or less fixed what "resemblance of the photograph to reality" means. (Agreement in technique, it bears mentioning, does not mean that everyone gets treated the same way by that technique.) But there are other things we might mean (not only by "resemblance to reality") by asking whether an ID resembles a person, aside from what a TSA officer checking IDs might mean. We tend to find it fun to look at the

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[112] Andrew Norris's recent book on Cavell has helped clarify this thought for me in a particularly useful way. See Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and especially chapter 1.

[113] Perhaps we might say: concept of convention still seems propped up by an oppositional relation to a vague idea of what is natural, of what is not conventional. But if all we mean by "convention" is defined by the residue of this false opposition between nature and convention, we will still not get Wittgenstein's point clearly in view.

[114] Cora Diamond's response to Onora O'Neil in "Anything but Argument" is an inspiration for this important point. See her "Anything But Argument" and "Wittgenstein and Metaphysics" in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

photos of people we know and love, for example, to compare the impression these pictures give to our sense of the person in real life. This is another "practice" in which the correspondence relation plays a role, but it is a very different kind of practice, and therefore one in which the correspondence relation will play a distinct role.

"Agreement in technique" is not (just) a stipulated or "context-dependent" agreement about what resemblance means, but a social harmony of practice *in which* the philosophical concept has a home. While practices may be context dependent, it is not context itself, but rather the flow of human activities and practices which gives shape to the "technique" for understanding "resemblance." What Wittgenstein is after is a recording of the register in which we encounter, in our own use of words, the kinds of agreement we find ourselves to have (and not to have) over the meaning of our words.

There will be different uses and different kinds of correspondence relations as they show up in our everyday practices, from the TSA "ID" checking to looking at the photo of someone we love, and this reveals something important about the simple example which Wittgenstein offers. In the case of a general, abstract question about whether the photograph resembles reality, there is a noticeable *lack* of (explicit or contractual) agreement over what will "count" and what we will accept as the photo of the man "resembling" the real man (which is not to say we couldn't convene on what will count in a particular context). This is Wittgenstein's main point in the passage quoted above.

Now, a question we might ask is where, on a spectrum of indeterminacy to determinacy, rules or techniques for establishing the agreement of an object (in this case, a photograph) with reality fall. Are they "determinant" in the way that rules of arithmetic are determinate, appearing to allow for only one way of following the rule? Or

are they indeterminant in the way that a rule in sports is: purposefully circumscribing a *field* of permissible actions, to allow for the excitement and variation which characterizes competitive sports?

The answer to this (in a Wittgenstein spirit) would be a further question: *which* rules or techniques are being referred to? There is an enormous array of practices in which the technique of comparing, say, pictures to reality may be differently defined. Further, as we saw following Cavell, the undefined nature of this relation is part of what the beauty and challenge of criticism of photography amounts to – that the photograph reveals something about reality we may have missed. Ultimately, there are a great number of *different* rules or techniques which would need to be analyzed in order to get clear about the determinacy of rules.

To see why these differences are important, imagine the following case: two people very much agree that a particular photograph resembles a particular person in one sense (a physical likeness to the real person) while disagreeing that it does in a second sense (a likeness to the character of the person, to "who that person is"). For example, one person finds the photographed man's personality genuine and alluring, while the other finds it insincere and superficial. These two people could easily agree in the first sense while disagreeing in the second sense; they could be of different minds about the person, and therefore of different minds about what "resemblance" means. We thus might say that in the first sense, it is relatively clear what technique was used for comparing the picture with reality: physical likeness. In the second sense, concerned with likeness of character, the technique is not defined and perhaps in a certain way *could* not be defined, at least not until we had come to an agreement about what sort of person the person under discussion *is*. (And to complicate things further, our sense of a

person is connected to our history with that person, mingled with our own suspicions, our own personalities, and much more.) Thus, in the first case, the "technique" for comparing the photo to reality comes more or less easily to us, while in the second case – the case of comparing whether a photo resembles our sense of a person's character – it might not be as simple to say what the technique or pattern would be for establishing "resemblance."

One could argue that the physical-based and the character-based cases of comparing the photograph to reality lie closer to the determinacy end of the spectrum and closer to the indeterminacy end of the spectrum, respectively. In the case of asking whether the man resembles the photograph in the sense of physical appearance, then, we are closer to a technique which allows for only so much deviation in response. In the case of asking whether the man resembles the photograph in the sense of character, we are employing a technique which allows for much more variety.

But even *this* seems too general on a Wittgensteinian view, for the way in which the character-based sense of resemblance operates is not indeterminate in the same way that the rules which govern tennis are indeterminate. In tennis, the indeterminacy internal to the sense of rule-following allows for competition and varieties of strategies and styles. But the indeterminacy of rule-following internal to a discussion between two people who disagree about who a person is and about whether a photograph resembles that person, is not quite the same: the rules are not so much "permissive" (as in tennis) as "empty"; in other words, the rules are agreed upon, but there is no agreed-upon starting place for making use of those rules. For we might come to the conclusion that, *if* we agree about who this person is, then we could agree that the photograph resembles him. But the antecedent would remain unsatisfied; it's very presence in the conversation

creates both a form of background agreement and a form of tension. This would be a very different kind of indeterminacy than the kind of indeterminacy which governs many rules in sports. Similarly, simply stating that rules in mathematics are "determinate," without specifying what determinateness *in mathematics* consists of, ought not to be satisfying if we are being responsible to what the way in which rules constrain our use of words (in mathematics).

In lecture seven of *LFM*, just a few paragraphs after the passages we have already discussed, Wittgenstein tells his audience:

> Sometimes what is meant by agreement with reality is quite clear. But in a certain number of cases it doesn't determine what we are to do.
>
> Collating the people in this room. – I may have a list, and I may look at each person in turn and tick off his name on the list. "So-and-so, so-and-so…The following people are in this room. Or "The following people are sitting, the following standing," with a picture of sitting or standing, etc. This is the kind of case from which we get our picture.[115]

Here, Wittgenstein takes an extraordinarily ordinary or banal example of taking roll or taking attendance and says: "this is the kind of case from which we get our picture." Our picture of *what*, exactly? By way of response, I suggest that here, roll call is the kind of case from which we get our picture of the correspondence relation between word (names or pictures on paper) and world (who is actually in the room): in taking roll, we check to see whether the names or pictures on paper agree with the people actually sitting in the room. This ordinary act of checking – from paper to world, as it were – is the kind of activity or practice in which the correspondence relation *has a home*, in which a *technique* for evaluating the sign's correspondence with the world has been established.

[115] Wittgenstein, *LFM*, 69.

Yet, even here it is important to remember there are may exist many differences. How a set manager checks a prop list against the set-up of the stage, for example, is quite different than how a teacher checks an attendance list against the people in the classroom. The correspondence relation between words and world plays different roles within each of these activities or practices. Said better: in each and any of these different contexts, even within similar cases of collating, there will be a different (though similar) technique of "correspondence with reality"; *agreement* in these techniques is simply part of what it means to be a speaker of a common language. We did not convene or draw them ourselves, but they are present in our language, and we, as speakers, take them up.

Wittgenstein, again, is *not* denying that there are correspondence relations in our language. He is denying that they are doing the kind of work, playing the kind of role, that the philosopher needs them (or "it") to play. We might put it this way: if you must have mastered the correspondence relation to be able to mean "it is raining," then you must be able to see that there is a relation of agreement between the weather and your expression. Similarly, you must have mastered the correspondence relation in order to take attendance. But neither technique – checking the weather or checking attendance – is *dependent* on "the correspondence theory of truth" for its adequacy in practice the way we want this dependency to function in our philosophizing. That is, the correspondence relation is governed neither by the correspondence theory nor by anything intrinsic to an abstract idea of "context." What governs the correspondence theory is also what allows it to assume meaning for us: its place in the innumerably different activities and practices in which it has a function, use, and meaning.

The heterogeneous things which "agreement with reality" means for us are, for Wittgenstein, embodied and embedded in what we do with words. We *may* say that the truth of "it is raining" and "x, y, and z aren't present" depends on a correspondence between the statement and the world, but what would saying this add to our understanding of the sentence? The first step is deflationary: to see that all we want to say about the correspondence relation is, as it were, already within the uses of words, and further that this is not a *theoretical* relation, but part of what we do. In the case of collating, we can say that "the list corresponds to reality," but this merely states that taking attendance was successful, that the attendance list served its purpose, that the practice did what we wanted it to dos. Framed this way, "corresponds with reality" suddenly fails to take on the metaphysical, sublime hue it can take on in our thinking.

In doing philosophy, we sometimes attempt to stand outside of any particular practice and claim, for example, that:

> A statement is true if there is a corresponding fact or set of facts in reality to which that statement corresponds.

For Wittgenstein, if this is taken to be a sort of general summary of what, in every example we've analyzed so far, shows up for us as "agreement with reality," then it now appears not so much false or wrong but *empty* – emptied of all descriptiveness, emptied of all use. Such a sentence may lead one to think that there is just "one relation" between facts and the world, as if there *must be* something in common to all of the ways in which signs like statements or photos or lists agree with reality. Such an idea is an example of what Wittgenstein calls "a preconception to which reality *must* correspond": it is a preconception of the way what we mean by "correspondence with reality" must correspond with reality.

In the next and final section, I continue to unpack this criticism by arguing that the claim that "either a use of language is governed by the correspondence relation, or it is not" – an apparently straightforward application of the logical law of excluded middle – is itself confused. Said otherwise, the law of excluded middle does not apply to the philosophical claim that "the meaning of a word is its correspondence between word and world." Under the spell of the Augustinian theory of meaning, we have lost grip on our concepts in such a way that we have also lost our grip on logical laws. Logic does not circumscribe what we can say in this way.

Cavell at Criticism

Cavell puts the question of how to criticize the Augustinian picture of meaning like this:

> Again, Wittgenstein will speak of Augustine's description as containing a "philosophical concept of meaning" (PI, 2). Yet Augustine's words seem ordinary enough. They are arch and over-precise maybe, even pedantic. Why does Wittgenstein say "philosophical?" Wittgenstein records other responses he has to Augustine's words, but what interests me already is what Wittgenstein does not say about that passage, having singled it out as philosophically remarkable. He does not say, for example, that it is false, or that there is insufficient evidence for it, or that it contradicts something else Augustine says elsewhere, or that it is unclear, or that it contains an invalid argument. These are familiar terms of criticism in philosophy; and they are strong ones. If any of them does fit a statement, then that statement has been severely and importantly chastised.[116]

What terms of criticism are appropriate for the Augustine's philosophical notion of meaning? Cavell suggests here that, the problem is not an invalid, unclear, contradictory, or even *false* claim. In this section, I aim to unpack the Cavellian

[116] Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts," 265.

suggestion, made above, that, though the Augustinian picture has a hold on us, it is *neither true nor false*.

It can seem forced on us to either *affirm* or *deny* the philosophical notion that "the meaning of the word is the object for which it stands," that meaning is "correspondence between word and world." I have thus far tried to apply a form of Cavellian criticism to this philosophical notion: I have tried to show that the correspondence relation has an ordinary home in the way language functions, but that something has led us away from that function.

Alice Crary, in the introduction to the volume *The New Wittgenstein,* writes that "abandoning the idea of an external standpoint on language only appears to threaten our entitlement to talk about full-blooded objectivity if it is assumed that we depend for any entitlement we enjoy on the existence of features of reality which transcend our forms of thought and speech…"[117] If such an external vantage point is taken merely to be "out of reach," in other words, then Wittgenstein would still preserve the idea that such an external stand point exists.[118] What, then, might lead us to think that such "an external stand point" on language use was possible? What wish [119]might incline us to construe meaning in the Augustinian way?

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[117] Alice Crary, "Introduction," in *The New Wittgenstein,* eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, 1–18 (New York: Routledge, 2001), 3.
[118] Ibid., 3.
[119] Freud famously defines illusion as a "belief caused by a wish." And a way of understanding Cavell here, through the lens of psychoanalysis, would be to ask what wish is causing the belief in metaphysical foundations *or* skepticism – made in one another's image – at work here. Jonathan Lear discusses this concept of illusion in Freudian terms in his *Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Interestingly, in the glossary to that book, Lear provides this definition of a (Freudian) illusion: "a belief caused by a wish. We take our beliefs to be responsive to reality; thus when we are in the grip of an illusion we are misled about the source and authority of our belief." The resonances of Cavell's analysis of skepticism with this way of understanding "illusion" are deep and many.

One possible response is that such a picture elevates us as all-knowing observers of the meaning of words. We can rest "on the outside" as it were, and assess, from a perspective outside the messiness and the ongoing cares, commitments, and contingencies of human life – finally *assess,* and be finished with questioning – the correspondence between a word and its "object." From such a comportment or posture, it may be easy to imagine the acquisition of language as the learning of the particular objects to which words correspond, rather than as the painful initiation, as children, into foreign, adult practices, activities, and institutions which existed before we were born, which we do not have any say in creating, and which we are often helpless to change, even in the face of extreme suffering of ourselves or others.

At the beginning of this chapter, I compared the skeptic to the child, and we have now come full circle. But it no longer seems right to say that the skeptic, in rejecting the spheres of human work, action, activity, and interest, is merely recoiling from the idea that constraints make meaning possible or imagining, falsely, that these constraints are barriers to meaning. It seems rather that, under a certain conception of the correspondence relation of meaning, we reject, not just constraints, but something like the *temporality*, the everydayness, of human life *as such*; as if, beneath this picture, we hold out hope that one day, someday, we would reach a terminal point where we could be certain that our words or claims do *really do* "correspond with some 'reality' that exists outside of human interests, practices, cares and commitments." A Cavellian "perfectionist" response to such a drive, if heard in the right way, might be: one day, the task of becoming human will be finished. But that will not be while we are alive.

CHAPTER THREE

Cavell and the Mixed Legacy of Skepticism

It's difficult to understand how the following two fundamental elements of the late Stanley Cavell's philosophy hang together:

> (1) Cavell's idea that following the temptation to skepticism will lead to psychological and philosophical grief;[120] and
>
> (2) The perspective on ordinary language and meaning which becomes discernible after skepticism denies that understanding or after metaphysics transcends it.

These two elements strike me as incompatible in some as-yet not fully specified way. On the one hand, Cavell writes about the possibility of what he calls skepticism to destroy or deny "our sense of self, world, and others."[121] But on the other hand, Cavell's philosophy praises and enacts – arguably even actively seeks out – the philosophical understanding available when we "return" to the ordinary from wherever it is we had been while

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[120] For one of Cavell's representative formulations of the "cost of skepticism," including "illusions of meaning," "impossible privacies," and even the "loss or forgoing of selfhood," see Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 242. But as I aim to show in this chapter, the costs of skepticism are often also coupled with significant philosophical insight.

[121] In their introduction to *Varieties of Skepticism,* James Conant and Andrea Kern write that all the contributors to their volume share "the conviction that the problem of skepticism is not just any old philosophical puzzle" and that although skepticism is "first and foremost an intellectual puzzle, skepticism threatens not just some set of theoretical commitments, but also – and fundamentally – our very sense of self, world, and other…" See James F. Conant and Andrea Kern "Introduction," in *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays After Kant, Wittgenstein and Cavell*, eds. James F. Conant and Andrea Kern, 1–16 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 1. This shared conviction about the disquieting nature of skepticism, but even more so, the differences which emerge out of this conviction, are an obvious starting point for this essay.

entangled with skepticism. The aim of this essay is to better understand the way these two key elements of Cavell's philosophy fit together.[122]

Two passages from a late lecture/essay, "The Wittgensteinian Event," (2004) offer a preliminary formulation of these two elements, in Cavell's own words. On the one hand Cavell testifies to the grief of skepticism:

> *Philosophical Investigations*…at a certain point comes upon what I think of as a counter-myth to that of Eden, a counter-interpretation of our present condition, meant at once to recognize the repetitive force of our temptation to leave it (as if our ordinary lives and language are limitations or compromises of the human) and at the same time to indicate that following the temptation will lead to grief.[123]

But on the other hand, Cavell testifies to what we might call the mixed legacy of skepticism, suggesting that our understanding of skepticism and our understanding of the ordinary are inter-dependent in his philosophy:

> Wittgenstein gives very little direct development of the concept of the ordinary or everyday use of language, but without the concept, his greater development, or portraiture, of the metaphysical in language (or of skepticism, for Wittgenstein the intellectual twin of metaphysics) could not be undertaken…The ordinary occurs essentially in *Philosophical Investigations* as what skepticism denies, and metaphysics transcends…[124]

The development of the concept of the "metaphysical" depends on the development of the concept of the ordinary, for Cavell's Wittgenstein. So, is skepticism in Cavell's philosophy something which brings us to grief or something which offers philosophical insight, or both? And if both – as I aim to show – what do we make of the mutual

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[122] Throughout this chapter, I follow the trend in the literature on Cavell that it isn't always necessary or even possible to dis entangle "Cavell's philosophy" Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein. Cavell returns to the *Investigations* again and again in his philosophy – regularly uncovering new insights. Of course, there is much about Cavell's philosophy which is *not* a reading of the *Investigations* as well.
[123] Stanley Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 192–213 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 196.
[124] Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," 195.

constitution of these two concepts; i.e., the sense in which the "ordinary occurs…as what skepticism denies?"[125]

My plan, and way of offering a response to these questions, is this. In the first part of the chapter, I suggest that the disagreement between Stephen Mulhall and Stephen G. Affeldt regarding the role of criteria and rules in Cavell's vision of language is in significant part a disagreement (not about rules but) about the fact that, and the way in which, a confrontation with skepticism leads to philosophical insight about language and meaning. I suggest that this disagreement is indicative of a widely made assumption – and an understandable one – that the dialectical space of skepticism, whether Kantian or Cartesian in nature, is just a bad place to be. To better spell out both why we are inclined to think this and why it misses fundamental parts of Cavell's thought, in the second section I offer a few representative formulations of Cavell's understanding of skepticism from different moments of his philosophical career. I trace some ways in which these formulations incline us to think of skepticism as something like a curse, something we ought simply to avoid, undercut, or defeat, in order to show, in the next section, that a fundamental part of Cavell's vision of language is unveiled or clarified only through a confrontation with that very skeptical impulse we wished would disappear. More specifically, I try to unpack Cavell's claim that what he calls "non-criterial" differences in ordinary language "make skepticism possible," in order to argue that the understanding of non-criterial differences which we find in Cavell's philosophy is inseparable from a confrontation with skepticism. This gives me one specific sense in

[125] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 171. Moreover, if Cavell is right and the skeptical plight of mind gives rise to a specific form of illusion or hallucination of meaning, then we must also have never actually left the ordinary.

which knowledge in Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary (in language) is made possible only by working through the confrontation with skepticism, thus one specific sense in which skepticism is a mixed legacy.[126] Or so this chapter tries to show.

Affeldt and Mulhall on Linguistic Normativity

Many of Cavell's best readers have picked up on the general fact I am commenting on here: the way in which key parts of Cavell's philosophy are accessible (only?) from the vantage point of an encounter with skepticism. The debate between Stephen Mulhall and Steven G. Affeldt turns on precisely these grounds. Affeldt has criticized Stephen Mulhall's account, in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary,* of Cavellian criteria; in particular, Affeldt has criticized Mulhall's operating assumption that criteria exist independently of language users and form an "always-present ground of our intelligibility and linguistic competence."[127] One way in which Affeldt puts his criticism is that "Mulhall's text fail[ed] to capture the way in which – and the depth at which – for Cavell, Wittgenstein's vision of language is formed in response to the continuous threat of skepticism, understood as the human drive to transcend itself, make itself inhuman."[128] It is skepticism which makes criteria "visible" for us, Affeldt claims,[129] implying that what Cavell means to express by criteria only play a role in his philosophy after the attunements in forms of life (which criteria are to

[126] Cf. Thompson Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism" in *The Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 20 (1972), 754–69. Clarke ends his paper with the suggestion: "How radically that structure must differ from the standard type, if capable of permitting with the characteristics of Dream to be concepts, and the plain skeptical possibilities to be possibilities, is evident enough" (ibid., 769).
[127] Steven G. Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural," in *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays After Kant, Wittgenstein and Cavell*, eds. James F. Conant and Andrea Kern, 311–62 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 323. See also Steven G. Affeldt, "The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria: Judgment and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell," *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998), 1–31.
[128] Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural," 311.
[129] Ibid., 343.

express or give a partial account of) have been broken. Thus Affeldt sees Cavell's concept of criteria as rough expressions of the general fact that we share a language and as relevant less for giving an account of that general fact of a shared language – he arguably follows Wittgensteinians in eschewing that task – and relevant more for responding to the threat of skepticism.

In more recent scholarship, Mulhall acknowledges that, in his earlier, full-length book on Cavell, he sometimes interpreted criteria as existing independently of language users and as forming an "always-present ground of our intelligibility and linguistic competence."[130] But it is worth noting that not everything Mulhall says in that earlier book gives this impression. For example, Mulhall writes that for Cavell "appeals to criteria and to grammar are not attempts to explain or prove that human beings are attuned with one another in their words…they are, when successful, exemplifications of [that attunement]."[131] And the *appeal* to criteria, Mulhall writes, "tends to occur precisely when this attunement is threatened or lost, when we seem not to know our way around with respect to our words and the world to which they apply."[132] So Mulhall in places registers Cavell's idea that appeals to criteria and to "what we say when" are a way of responding to a specific state in which intelligibility has been threatened or lost – suggesting, in this way, that the appeal to criteria is internally related to a response to the impulse to skepticism, and is not a solution or final defeat of skepticism.[133]

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[130] The quotation is from Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural," 323. For Mulhall's discussion of his earlier interpretation of Cavell, see Mulhall, "Inner Constancy, Outer Variation."
[131] Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 92–93
[132] Ibid., 93.
[133] And in this vein Mulhall then writes that skepticism, for Cavell, "is not best characterized as a commitment to a body of beliefs or hypotheses which might be based upon inadequate evidence or invalid arguments and so might be open to refutation; it is rather an impulse to repudiate or deny the framework within which alone human speech is possible, and so exemplifies one way in which human beings attempt to deny their conditionedness (their condition)" (ibid., 113).

Affeldt goes on to criticize Mulhall's, or any scholar's, appeal to a concept of rules to explain *any* aspect of Cavell's vision of language. Even if an appeal to rules is only meant to account for the regularity or normativity across uses of a word and does not take on the ultra-rigid shape of rails extending indefinitely into the future.[134] Affeldt still thinks that for Cavell and Cavell's Wittgenstein, a comparison of meaning with rules is distorting. Affeldt does not think that the rule following passages in the *Investigations* are even meant to provide an account of linguistic meaning, neither for Wittgenstein nor for Cavell's reading of him.[135] To mount this criticism, Affeldt contrasts "human desires, interests, purposes, forms of life," etc., with any and all concepts of rules, claiming that for Cavell the fragile and shifting ground of our shared language falls can only be accounted for by interests, purposes, forms of life, not by a conception of rules. As Affeldt writes:

> To possess a concept, to be able to go on with a concept, is to appreciate how its significant employment is bound up with our interests, desires, purposes, biological and social forms of life, facts about our social and natural world, and the like…[it] is to appreciate the weave of connections both among our concepts and between our concepts and our interests, desires, purposes, forms of life, natural reactions, facts about the world, and so on. It is in this sense that coming to possession of concepts is becoming an initiate of forms of life.[136]

Well, Mulhall is also concerned to show how, for Cavell, concepts and beliefs do not stand alone, that there is significant interweaving between our concepts and beliefs. And Mulhall is also concerned to give an account of how "possessing a concept" requires being an initiate in the relevant forms of life. So, it is not with respect to these facts that Mulhall and Affeldt's interpretation of Cavell differs. The apparent difference between

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[134] I borrow this from McDowell, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule Following."
[135] For this way of putting the matter, I am indebted to Conant and Kern's "Introduction," in *Varieties of Skepticism*.
[136] Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural," 344.

these two critics lies in their differing *emphases* on whether (1) some conception of rules or rather (2) interests, desires, purposes, etc. account at bottom for linguistic constancy or normativity. Neither Mulhall nor Affeldt think that the above disjunction is exclusive, but their interpretations place more emphasis on rules and forms of life respectively.

But at certain points in Affeldt's later essay, I find the contrast between rules and forms of life to be put too strongly, and I suspect that this is a consequence of Affeldt's interest in displacing the concept of rules in his reading of Cavell and a consequence of his thinking that this displacement is necessary to unveil the metaphysical ungroundedness of ordinary occasions of use.[137] It is true that for Cavell what we call rules are, as Affeldt notes, an expression of certain non-rule-giving capacities of human nature. But this does not mean that the appeal to rules is unimportant. I think it's possible to both get the metaphysical ungroundedness of Cavell's vision of language into view *and* still maintain a modified conception of rules – this is, for example, what a comparison between rules and games might accomplish, such as in the previous chapter. Said otherwise, if we account for linguistic normativity (and creativity) by means of the concept of a rule, we do not automatically lose out on our ability to account for the fragility of mutual comprehension (which I take to be one of Mulhall's points). But at the same time, the "terrifying" fragility of the ground of mutual comprehension is difficult to get into view from a perspective which tends to focus too much on rules (which I take to be one of Affeldt's points).

What I think follows is that we need to shift the "hinge" of the debate slightly: the question whether the concept of a rule can account for linguistic normativity isn't the

[137] Ibid., 318.

hinge on which Cavell's vision of language hangs. In fact, part of what I think is really going on is that we do not have an adequate picture of the way in which, for Cavell, Wittgenstein's vision of language is formed in response to the continuous threat of skepticism – which as we saw was a large part of Affeldt's intent. As Cavell puts it in his 1988 Tanner Lecture, *The Uncanniness of the Ordinary*, "I might epitomize Wittgenstein's originality in this regard by saying that he takes the drift toward skepticism as the *discovery* of the everyday, a discovery of exactly *what* it is that skepticism would deny."[138] But the specific sense in which this is true – the sense in which the ordinary is constituted by the skeptic's denial of it – is not well understood in Cavell's philosophy; and it is not clarified simply by denying, as Affeldt does, that the concept of a rule has any role in Cavell's thinking. At the conclusion of this chapter, we will return to the debate between Mulhall and Affeldt with a better understanding of the role of the threat of skepticism in Cavell's philosophy.

Cavellian Skepticism – An "Unconventional Idiom"

In order to understand the insights of Cavell's philosophy which come out of a confrontation with skepticism – even as Cavell argues that the skeptical bent of mind is so destructive – it would be useful to give some sort of working definition of what Cavell calls skepticism. Unfortunately, this turns out to be rather difficult to do. Cavell's well-known claim – that skepticism is a much wider, much deeper, and much more disquieting problem than philosophers have typically understood it to be – is still understood in a variety of ways. In part, this is because Cavell's own understanding of

[138] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary,* 171.

the problem, like any thinker's, changes over time, as Andrew Norris, in his recent study of Thompson Clarke's influence on Cavell, has recently mapped in detail.[139] Accordingly, in this section I will try to give a few representative formulations of Cavell's understanding of skepticism from different moments of his writing and show why these formulations incline us to think of skepticism as something like an inescapable curse, something we might wish we could defeat or avoid, in order to show, in the next section, a fundamental part of Cavell's vision of language is unveiled or clarified only through a confrontation with it. Although this is not my primary concern, I'll also highlight some bridges between the three primary forms of skepticism discussed in the literature on Cavell and on skepticism: (1) the possibility of knowledge of external world, (2) the possibility of knowledge regarding the meanings of words and mutual comprehension, and (3) the possibility of knowledge of others, or "other minds."[140] The aim is both to introduce key features of what Cavell calls skepticism and also to motivate the tension at the heart of this chapter: given that the skeptic threatens our sense of self, world and others, why engage with skepticism at all?[141]

An increasingly well-known formulation[142] of what skepticism is comes from part one of *The Claim of Reason* (1979):

> I do not…confine the term [skepticism] to those who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge. A crucial step for me, in calling an argument skeptical, is that it contain a passage running roughly, "So we don't know (on the basis of the senses (or behavior) alone; then (how) do we know?". It is at this stage that

[139] Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). See especially ch. 2.
[140] Conant and Kern, "Introduction," 1.
[141] See Richard Rorty, "Cavell on Skepticism," in *Contending With Stanley Cavell,* ed. Russell B. Goodman, 10–21 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[142] Both Norris (2017) and Conant (2012) draw on this particular formulation to motivate their readings of Cavell.

> philosophies break into Phenomenalism, Critical Realism, etc.…I hope it will not seem perverse that I lump views in such a way, taking the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy to have answered the question affirmatively or negatively. It is perspective from which skepticism and (what Kant calls) dogmatism are made in one another's image, leaving nothing for choice.[143]

Here it's clear that skepticism as Cavell understood it is not confined to a particular denial or negative conclusion (we "do *not* know" such-and-such) but to something like the mode of thought which gives rise to that denial, implying that defenses *or* affirmations of what the skeptic seeks to question may also be infected by skepticism. Here is part of Conant's (2012) gloss on or elaboration of this passage:

> …According to this unconventional idiom, the term skepticism…refers not just to one particular sort of philosophical position (i.e., that held by one or another sort of skeptic) but rather to the wider dialectical space within which philosophers occupying a range of apparently opposed philosophical positions (such as "realism, "idealism," "coherentism" etc.) engage one another, while seeking a stable way to answer the skeptic's question in the affirmative rather than (as the skeptic himself does) in the negative.[144]

Thus skepticism in this Cavellian idiom refers not just to the negative philosophical position that denies that we can know anything about the external world, other minds, or semantic meaning, but to the wider dialectical space in which the affirmation or denial of the skeptical claim – in which so *much* seems at stake – can arise. To take the example of external world (Cartesian) skepticism, skepticism in this Cavellian idiom doesn't just refer to the skeptic who claims that we have insufficient grounds for arriving at knowledge of the external world or the objects within it (because we only see part of objects, or because our brains have been shaped by a long process of evolution which has nothing to do with responsibility to reality, or because we only see on the visual

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[143] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 46.
[144]James Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 2012, 3. Accessed at: https://humstatic.uchicago.edu/philosophy/conant/Conant%202012%20Two%20Varieties%20of%20Skepticism.pdf.

spectrum, etc. etc.) – but rather to a particular mood in which the human mind attempts to test the position or place of human knowledge as a whole.

If we understand skepticism as a "dialectical space," then Cavell's approach to skeptical questions starts to make a lot more sense.[145] Generally speaking – and even as early as some of the essays in *Must We Mean What We* Say – Cavell is concerned to break through with some "third way" with skeptical questions, neither affirming nor denying the skeptical conclusion, but instead shifting the interest of, and our interest in, the skeptical problem.[146] There are many different ways in which he does this, but for now my point is a general or methodological one. To the questions of whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself others in it, for example, Cavell answers neither affirmatively nor negatively, but changes the way we understand the question, shifts our interest in it (often, as we will see, encouraging us to retrace the initial steps which lead to what felt like such a necessary skeptical question, a strategy he shares with some other Wittgensteinians).

But I think it's also important to acknowledge something else about Cavell's engagement with skepticism. If skepticism is understood as a "wider dialectical space" of philosophical questioning, and that space is framed pejoratively (putting aside for now exactly where that negative frame comes from), then it makes sense to think of skepticism in purely negative terms. There appears to be good reason for thinking that what skepticism shows is that, to put it bluntly, *we should avoid skepticism*. And a perfectly reasonable response at this juncture seems to be: why engage with skeptical

[145] This change over time would be philosophically worthwhile to chart in scholarly detail, as Andrew Norris has done with parts of Cavell's early work, see Norris, *Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell*.
[146] Stanley Cavell, "Responses," in *Contending With Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman, 157–76 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 159.

questions at all? This question is encouraged both by some of Cavell's ways of wording the encounter with skepticism (as we will see in the next section) and by some of Cavell's critics.

Let me add another cautionary note here. It is often repeated that Cavell thinks that skepticism is inescapable or unavoidable. But "unavoidable" is one of those terms which seems to invite a "demand for absoluteness." If something is unavoidable, we are inclined to think, then we just cannot avoid it. And that seems to give us a crystalline kind of clarity about the meaning of the concept. And yet if we think about the sorts of things we call "unavoidable," if we ask ourselves what is at stake in the uses of this term, we quickly find that the super-hard or absolute sense of unavoidable seems not to clarify or even resonate with those ordinary instances.[147] We say, for example, that taxes are unavoidable – and we don't mean that you can't pay your taxes but that *if* you don't and if you get caught, you will probably be punished by the state. We say in idiomatic English that death, too, is unavoidable – and what exactly do we take ourselves to mean by that? Surely not just that everyone dies; for that assertion itself has not yet been fully specified. Thus, saying that "skepticism is unavoidable" does not answer the question of what Cavell's sentence means, but is at best only an invitation to expand on the sense in which it is unavoidable.

Skepticism's Chagrin

If we add the idea of skepticism as an unavoidable dialectical space to other comments Cavell makes about the psychological distress, confusion, and intellectual

[147] I mean to echo or paraphrase the dilemma James Conant brings out in his great essay, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein." See James F. Conant, "Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein" in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005), 51–65.

impotency associated with skepticism, especially as they surface in Cavell's later works – for now we might simply call the post-*Claim of Reason* period "later works," – then I think the inclination to say that skepticism is something we just better avoid becomes overwhelming. For example, Cavell repeatedly returns to the company he found in Emerson's having written, in *Self-Reliance,* that:

> …conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.[148]

The experience of chagrin at every word others say is an experience Cavell repeatedly identifies as at the root of certain forms of skepticism – skepticism about the meaning of words, for example. This an experience in which, as Cavell writes, "every word [Emerson] shares with others (which is essentially to say, his every word) is ready to cause him chagrin."[149] This irritation or irascibility at the mere sound of another's voice, hiding perhaps a wish that this other person be silent, that they fail to be capable of being an opposing source or spring of desire, might lead one (it has lead me) to ask once again: "Why not just avoid this experience? What does it really have to teach us?" And for good reason. Who would court such psychological straits?

Yet another formulation of skepticism, in something akin to these latter terms, comes from Cavell's book on Shakespeare. In his essay on Othello, Cavell more or less identifies with Othello's dependence-turned-jealousy of Desdemona, and these pages contain some of the most vitriolic expressions of the despair, impotence, and

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[148] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume II: Essays: First Series*, eds. by Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr, 25–51 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).
[149] Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts From Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 8.

desperation of skepticism in Cavell's body of work. For example, while contributing to the tomes of scholarship on why Othello becomes so unraveled so quickly by someone so obviously beneath him as Iago, Cavell writes:

> What specifically for me is at stake epistemologically in the allegory of Othello and Desdemona is my finding that Othello's radical, consuming doubt is not caused by Iago's rumoring. Othello rather seizes upon Iago's suggestions as effects or covers for something the object has itself already revealed, and claimed, despite its most fervent protestations to the contrary.…He [Othello] seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire could be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. It is against the (fantasied) possibility of overcoming this hyperbolic separateness that the skeptic's (disappointed, intellectualized, impossible, imperative, hyperbolic) demand makes sense.
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> …With his jealousy, Othello's violence studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism.[150]

I do not want to try and unpack this dense passage fully right now. What is important about it for our purposes is this. On Cavell's reading of the tragedy, Othello murders Desdemona not because he is "jealous" of her alleged affair with Cassio but because that jealousy is itself the product of a skeptical denial or "annihilation" of her, an attempt at possession in a way which erases (so much as the possibility of) her opposition to his desire. Cavell glosses that wishful, masculine, skeptical impulse to exclude others from the realm of possible opposition as the "fantasized possibility of overcoming… separateness," that is, the fantasized possibility of overcoming the fact that Desdemona may at any point withdraw her investment from him and from their shared world, that she may, for example, fail or disappoint him. If we were to write him new lines, Othello certainly could say that everything Desdemona says chagrins him, suggesting that "other

[150] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 43–44

mind" and "meaning" skepticism are deeply connected, at least as they are presented within Shakspearian tragedy. And the question I have asked myself at this juncture is again: isn't this just a bad place to be? Isn't the violent, masculine, skeptical fantasy of overcoming the space between people, like the skeptical fantasy of overcoming the space between the world and our faculties, just something we had better avoid? Or does the drive to overcome that space reveal certain features of it which, without that drive, would remain unclear and indistinct for us?

Non-Criterial Differences and Other Invitations to Skepticism

My aim in this section is to elucidate one sense in which it is true to say that if Cavell did not exactly "court" skepticism or seek it out, his philosophy or the insights which come from that philosophy would not have been possible without it. If this is right, I take two claims to follow: (1) that it's too simplistic to see skepticism in purely pejorative terms within Cavell's philosophy; and (2) skepticism makes possible "the eventual everyday" and the "actual everyday" makes skepticism possible.[151] It is our disappointment with the everyday that leads us to depart from it, and upon our return we find much room for growth and creativity. Again, my approach is to effectively re-describe Cavell's description of the skeptical problematic, drawing on formulations of his which have mattered to me.[152]

[151] This insight was clarified to me by reading Tyler Robert's chapter "Criticism as a Conduct of Gratitude" in his *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Secularism After Skepticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[152] Here it may also be worth mentioning, since we have traveled this far in the essay together already, that I have been struck by a scandal of skepticism in my life, both personally and philosophically, and that Cavell's philosophy has clarified both what it is which has struck me and how to philosophically engage with it.

Immediately before the following passage from his 1988 Tanner Lecture, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," Cavell has just been arguing that what Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Thoreau all share is both an attention to Kantian conditions (but not limitations) on human knowledge and a "continuous response to the threat of skepticism." Cavell goes on to say that:

> It seems to me that the originality of the *Investigations* [as opposed to Emerson or Thoreau] is a function of the originality of its response to skepticism, one that undertakes not to deny skepticism's power…but to diagnose the source (or say the possibility) of that power – to ask, as I put it a while ago, what it is about human language that allows us, even invites us, in its own name, to repudiate its everyday functioning, to find it wanting.[153] [154]

One of the specific ways in which, in Cavell's philosophy, the use of human language invites us to "repudiate it's everyday functioning," is Cavell's idea of "non-criterial" differences.[155] The role of non-criterial differences to Cavell's philosophy is a paradigm case of the kind of philosophical insight about meaning and ordinary language which (only?) an encounter with skepticism can unveil. As Cavell puts it:

> I note for future reference that it is my claim, in *The Claim of Reason,* that it is the difference between Austinian criterial differences (for example, between goldfinches and goldcrests) and Wittgensteinian non-criterial differences (for example, between rain and the appearance of rain) that makes skepticism possible. The differences among excuses are criterial; the differences between imitation, pretending, and so on, and what they imitate or pretend (to be real, to be sincere, and so on) are non-criterial.[156]

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[153] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 170. See also Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," 205.
[154] It is worth pointing out, for the sake of making connections between Cavell's readers, that what Conant (2012) calls "The Wittgenstein Way with Skepticism" is an elaboration of the point Cavell is making here. Conant writes that Wittgenstein "not only follow[s] the skeptic's presuppositions out to their ultimate consequences, but also examin[es] the initial steps in the Cartesian skeptic's progress toward doubt, identifying how the skeptic passes from ordinary to philosophical doubt, from a claim to a non-claim context, pinpointing the decisive movement in the philosophical conjuring trick and diagnosing why it is the one that is bound to seem most innocent."
[155] Cavell sometimes calls "non-criterial" differences "Wittgensteinian criteria," which can be confusing. Cf. Cavell, "The Wittgeinsteinian Event," 205.
[156] Stanley Cavell, *Pitch Of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92.

Austinian criterial differences are conceptual differences with traceable or detectable marks or features distinguishing them. As Hamawaki (2014) writes, Austinian criteria are "the sort of criteria that determine membership in a kind, such as the criteria for being a goldfinch."[157] The presence of Austinian criteria allow us, in Cavell's philosophy, to point to marks or features which distinguish x from y, say a goldfinch from a robin. Non-criterial or "Wittgensteinian" differences, however, are conceptual differences between which Cavell argues there are no ascertainable marks or features which form a boundary. Examples of non-criterial differences discussed at different points in Cavell's work include differences between something's being animate and it's being inanimate, between the appearance of real pain and a convincing faking of pain, between "real" rain and its appearance on a movie screen, for example. (Regardless the latter, a consistent move Cavell makes is not that we cannot say there is a difference between rain on the movie screen or television and non-filmic rain, for this would be obviously false, but that we do not know yet what this difference means to us, that its significance is as-yet unspecified, suggesting that there are distinctions between kinds of non-criterial differences). The difference between the two kinds of criteria, Austinian or Wittgensteinian, is the presence or absence of marks or features which allow us to clearly or meaningfully chart differences between objects.

Most critics, including Mulhall[158] and Hamwaki[159], have concentrated on the relation between Austinian and Wittgensteinian criteria and what Cavell calls specific and generic objects, the latter of which turns out to be, on Cavell's understanding, a

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[157] Arata Hamawaki, "Cavell, Skepticism, and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism" in *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays After Kant, Wittgenstein, and Cavell,* eds. James F. Conant and Andrea Kern, 389–427 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 412.
[158] Mulhall, "Inner Constancy, Outer Variation," 400–02; see also Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 56.
[159] Hamakawi, "Cavell, Skepticism, and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism," 412–13.

production of the skeptical straight of mind, and hence unable to bear the generalization onto all of specific objects.[160] But what I want to bring out here has a different and underappreciated emphasis. I want to narrow in on Cavell's claim that the difference between Austinian and Wittgensteinian criteria "makes skepticism possible."

The contours of skepticism will be different in each particular case and in each general genre of non-criterial difference, and here we only have space for only one particular case. Let's take a particularly striking genre of non-criterial difference which is central to Cavell's philosophy – the nature of the boundary between the animate and inanimate. I know of no better figure for the nature of this boundary than the image of the magic spyglass Cavell takes from E.T.A. Hoffman's short story, "The Sandman." In Hoffman's story, through Cavell's description, the hero Nathaniel falls in love with "the beautiful automaton Olympia," whom he sees "through a magic spyglass constructed by one of her constructors."[161] The spyglass turns the inanimate, animate. At first, other people mock Nathaniel's infatuation an automaton, but slowly, as the story creeps forward, those same people start to feel that "they may be making the same error with their own beloveds," seeing them as animate when they are secretly inanimate.[162]

When Nathaniel (the hero), after seeing the automaton Olympia torn into non-living pieces by her creators, turns the spyglass on his loyal and longtime lover Clara, he goes mad. And as readers, we are left wondering why. Cavell argues that it's too simple to just say that the spyglass, which had previously turned the inanimate animate, simply reverses things and turns Clara into an automaton. What happens when he sees Clara

[160] For what is to my mind the best recounting of Cavell's moves here, see Gustaffson, "Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples."
[161] Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 155.
[162] Ibid.

through the eyeglass, Cavell thinks, is instead that Nathaniel realizes that it is *within his responsibility* to see or to understand others as animate or inanimate, which means, for Cavell, to see them in a way which is affirmative of their separate, opposing life, or fail to. Thus, the spyglass in Hoffman's short story is a kind of figure for skepticism. But in what sense?

In the case of his loyal companion Clara, Nathaniel realizes that he had been denying the possibility of distance between them, denying to "bear her separateness." As in Freud's concept of transference, the realization that one was relating to another person in a constricted or destructive way is only possible *after* one has emerged from it, and the fact that one recognizes what's happening is itself a testament to the fact that it is no longer happening – Nathaniel's realization is possible only after skepticism has left its mark. What this suggests with respect to this discussion of non-criterial differences is that, in Cavell's philosophy, the presence or absence of the boundary between the animate and inanimate is not in principle discoverable or uncoverable in nature but is rather dependent on us in some fundamental way, and is therefore always in formation, for it is *we* who are forming it. This doesn't mean for Cavell that we are machines of "incessant animation," but only that the fact of animation is not a fact we can establish independently of our responsibility for deciding where that boundary should be. As Cavell so beautifully puts it:

> The moral of the [spyglass] machine I would draw provisionally in this way: There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference between them. From which let me simply claim, it does not follow that the difference is unknowable or undecidable. On the contrary, the difference is the basis of everything there is for

> human being to know, or say decide…and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves.[163]

One thing Cavell brings attention to here is the element of choice or value in the boundary between the animate or inanimate.[164] He also implies that we wish to shrink from this element of choice or value – we wish to locate in a realm "beyond or beside or beneath ourselves." Thus a further significance of the non-criterial difference between the animate and inanimate is just this: the fact of a non-criterial boundary between important concepts in our ordinary language inclines us toward the imagination of a metaphysical or skeptical realm in which we take that boundary to be clear to us. But with regard to Cavell's philosophy, we do not understand the non-criterial boundary or our desire to shrink from the responsibility of electing where it should be, *until we have returned to the ordinary from which we wished to depart*, returned to that non-criterial boundary which made us wishful for something beyond ourselves. Only then can our restlessness strike us in the way Cavell's philosophy needs it to.

A beautiful way in which Cavell formulates the significance of non-criterial differences within his philosophy is that our ordinary language is *vulnerable* – to skepticism. From this perspective, skepticism is not identical with non-criterial differences between concepts but is rather a relation or response to non-criterial difference: a wish, as one might say, for a firmer grounding on which such an important concept like "animate" – our basis for identifying what is *alive!* – might fall.

Martin Gustaffson has said that, on Cavell's understanding, what is truly terrifying about our responsibility to continue (or criticize) language use and cultural

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[163] Ibid., 158

[164] For this formulation and for a related pragmatist claim, see John Lachs, "The Element of Choice in Criteria of Death" in *Freedom and Limits*, ed. Patrick Shade, 231–50 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

practice isn't just that we are tempted to search for a certain, secure, and justified ground, outside of human subjectivity, for those practices and projections. "What seems worth fearing," Gustaffson writes, "is certainly not our propensity to engage in that kind of search, but the possibility that there is no justification of the sort we want to find."[165] What "merits fear" is not that search itself (rechanneled, it is part of what makes us human) but "our inclination to disclaim responsibility for the maintenance of those human practices within which language has life."[166] The security we seek in skepticism is not just unattainable, it is one which (surely in part in virtue of its unattainability) attempts to absolves us of responsibility. At some level we *want* to be stripped of this responsibility.

To take Gustaffson's thought one step further: what happens to our actual ordinary, to our understanding of non-criterial differences, after we have as it were retraced our steps back to the point at which we started our flight? What happens to the fact of non-criterial differences *after skepticism*? Not only do we understand that it is up to us where to draw the boundary, but we also bring to consciousness our temptation to shirk from that responsibility through a search for something which would remove that responsibility for us. And I think what may follow from *that* point is, rather than a sense of disappointment in limitations, we find a kind of self-aware affirmation and experimentation in having a say in the conditions for the perception of what is animate. And – and I think this is a central point – the specifically philosophical sense of

[165] Martin Gustaffson, "Familiar Words in Unfamiliar Surroundings: Davidson's Malapropisms, Cavell's Projections," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 5 (2011), 385.
[166] Ibid.

disappointment with the fact of non-criterial differences has dissolved, replaced with an acknowledgement of what lies within the sphere of our finite power.

Thus I think what skepticism provides in Cavell's philosophy is not only a sense of the contingency or "choice-inclusive" nature of those social practices and customs – protection of individual rights, freedom of religion, the right to pursue a meaningful life – which we wish to uphold, an idea which we can find in different forms in many philosophers. Cavell's encounter with skepticism also shows us that there is something about this contingency which terrifies us, which lures us into thinking that such a responsibility is not ours, and which knows no limit on the number of disguises it takes.

Conclusion – and a Return to Mulhall/Affeldt Debate

What I have been saying is not that skepticism is necessary for *identifying* the fact of non-criterial differences. We can obviously identify that there are no marks or features between pain and the successful performance of pain with or without skepticism. But unless one has:

(1) grown conscious of the dissatisfaction which, in some cases, accompanies the presence of non-criterial differences; and

(2) become aware of a yearning or longing for a special kind of ("in virtue of") fact which can settle the case, and then perhaps

(3) followed out that yearning or longing to its skeptical conclusion (according to Conant, it will be a form of skeptical paradox); and then

(4) returned to that ordinary non-criterial difference and seen it in a new light,

– then the initial absence of marks or features remains, I think, disappointing to us. We have not encircled the actual ordinary with a philosophical or Cavellian investigation which reveals our responsibility to engage and (re)form that ordinary. But notice that it is the "same fact," seen in two different lights, that marks the difference between non-criterial differences (as that which gives rise the skeptical flight without our recognizing that that is what has happened) before skepticism, and non-criterial differences after returning to the ordinary after skepticism, where we can recognize what it is we have sought to flee from (the realization that drove Nathaniel mad).

This bears on the disagreement between Mulhall and Affeldt on the locus of normativity in Cavell's vision of language. In short, I think a new distinction becomes relevant: between (1) the pre-skeptical perspective on the normativity of language use; and (2) the post-skeptical perspective on that "same" normativity of language use. I suggest, with regard to (1), that there are a set "pre-skeptical" questions about language and meaning in Cavell's philosophy where the concept of a rule has a place; for example, "passionate utterances" are defined in terms of a set of what Cavell explicitly calls, albeit using square quotes, "rules."[167] In this context, in which Cavell is trying to describe the marks and features of a kind of interpersonal moral encounter in which we take up the moral authority to question the conduct of another person, an authority we by default do not have, there is nothing fundamentally distorting about the concept of a rule to describe what language use looks like in these scenarios. Here, the concept of a "rule" is nothing more than a way of describing regularities in certain exemplary native speakers'

[167] Stanley Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterance," in In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 155–92 (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press,* 2005), 182.

uses of language; the speakers' use of language is not determined by or based on a body of rules. Or as we might say: use is prior rules.

But I think there are also, with regard to (2), a range of post-skeptical questions we might ask about everyday "uses" of language, or a set of perspectives we might take toward language use, where the concept of a "rule" really does more harm than good. For example, as both Mulhall and Affeldt now agree, what Cavell calls criteria are not a substructure or foundational body of rules we can fall back on to counter or defeat skepticism; once entangled with skepticism the appeal to criteria can at best be a reminder about the kinds of things we do and say with words. In this sense the ordinary language philosopher is powerless to *defeat* the skeptic, since the very practices the ordinary language philosopher reminds the skeptic of are the very same ones the skeptic has found lacking. At this juncture, we require a different sort of response to the skeptic; for example, we need to be able to show the skeptic that she has inadvertently brought to the surface the responsibility to maintain value-laden forms of life and the human fear of that responsibility. Here, the appeal to rules will amount to *more* than describing regularities in native speakers' uses of language; the appeal will rather seek to ground those regularities in rules, in precisely the way that Mulhall and Affeldt now agree is problematic, purporting that rules precede use.

So, when Affeldt writes, "it is not equating ordinary language and a calculus with fixed rules that is distorting; it is the comparison itself that misdirects and distorts our thinking," this is ambiguous. This may be true for the post-skeptical level (no concept of rule will show us how to go on after criteria have been put in question), but it is certainly not true for the pre-skeptical level, where I think for Cavell the notion of rule does have some place. Perhaps the debate could be clarified if this distinction was incorporated:

between the pre-skeptical set of question merely describing regularities in ordinary language use and the post-skeptical questions hinging on Cavell's vertiginous vision of linguistic normativity as based in forms of life and shared practices.[168]

Returning to the start, my aim in this chapter was to hold together these two elements of the late Stanley Cavell's philosophy:

(1) Cavell's idea that following the temptation to skepticism will lead to psychological and philosophical grief,[169] and
(2) The perspective on ordinary language and meaning which becomes discernible (only?) after skepticism denies that understanding or after metaphysics transcends it.

And to sum up the moral of the chapter now: it doesn't do justice to Cavell's confrontation with skepticism to think that the dialectical space of skepticism, whether Kantian or Cartesian in nature, is just a bad place to be. Psychologically speaking, this may be true – skepticism may lead us to all sorts of grief. But the philosophical terrain is much more complicated. While Cavell himself does often trace the contours, both felt and argumentative, of the dark side of skepticism, his philosophy is also vividly attentive to the insights which the skeptical bent of mind can help generate. For Cavell, the drive toward skepticism, when led in a different direction than the skeptic leads it, reveals boundaries as conditions rather than limitations on knowledge and reveals our ineliminable responsibility as speakers to criticize or uphold the forms of life which

[168] Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural," 311.
[169] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 242

make our language possible – even as it seeks to transcend or avoid them. Skepticism traces our finitude, but in relief, as if it were carving something which was always present but which we had not been able to see, revealing "language and the world as seen from the leaving of them."[170] Skepticism in Cavell's philosophy is a *mixed legacy*, driving us to both despair and perspicuity, neither one without the other.

[170] Stanley Cavell, "What's the Scandal of Skepticism?" in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 132–55 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 134.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Threat of Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy: Thinking with Cavell

"…philosophy's concern, through so much of its modern period, [is] with the crisis of knowledge associated with religion and scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries…Modern philosophy is familiarly taken to begin with Descartes's subjectifying of existence…showing the power of doubt to put into radical question the existence of the world and of myself and others in it…Much of subsequent philosophy – professional, academic philosophy at any rate – *has retained the skepticism but lost the route to God, making the existence of the world a persistent, epistemological problem of knowledge perpetually unjustified."*[171]

Introduction

Since the revival of ancient skepticism, particularly Pyrrhonism, in the European early modern period, "skepticism" in philosophy has referred to a family of philosophical positions in which the possibility of knowledge – of God, of the self, of "things in themselves," of the meaning of words – is denied.[172] To skeptical questions like, "can I *really* know what the nature of external objects is like?" or "can I really *know* that the self exists?" the skeptic answers that I know nothing at all, or at least know much less than I believed I did. Leaving many nuances aside here, on this paradigmatic account of what skepticism is, it is the negative answer to questions like these, the *denial* that knowledge is possible, that in fact makes a skeptical position a *skeptic*al one. So, for example, we understand Descartes' ultimate position in the *Meditations* (or the position

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[171] Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words*: *Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 265.

[172] In *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, Richard Popkin famously argues that the translation and rediscovery of Greek skepticism was a pivotal part of the crisis of faith of the European Enlightenment. The ancient Greek text most influential, Popkin writes, was Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. "Scepticism [sic] plays a special and different role in the period extending from the religious quarrels leading to the Reformation up to the development of modern metaphysical systems in the seventeenth century" (Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], xix).

that Descartes took himself to be in) – that knowledge of the world, self, and God is achievable – to be an *anti-skeptical* position precisely because he answers the skeptical question "is knowledge possible?" in the *affirmative*, rather than the negative. Of course, there may be significant debate about whether a philosopher has successfully defeated skepticism or not. But conceptually speaking, if a thinker successfully answers the skeptical question with a "yes, we *can* have (a certain sort of) knowledge of such-and-such," then they are not themselves a skeptic. Or so this framework – call it the "traditional framework" for thinking about skepticism – goes.

This is *not* the way that Stanley Cavell came to understand "skepticism," at least after finishing *The Claim of Reason* in 1979. Cavell's well-known analysis of skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* radically expands, and shatters, what philosophers have called "skepticism" since the early modern period in Europe. Cavell, inspired by J.L. Austin, Thompson Clarke, and of course the later Wittgenstein, undermines the traditional framework of skepticism's self-understanding: it's motivations (to test our most fundamental beliefs), goals (to arrive at knowledge), philosophical significance, and what counts as instance of it in philosophy.[173] One result – perhaps the result most often cited, and the least well understood – of Cavell's investigation into skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* is that, after the publication of that text, Cavell begins to identify the presence of skepticism(s) both within and outside of professional philosophy, in alienated modes of being-in-the-world and in unjust social arrangements, as well as in Shakespearean tragedy, etc. Of course, this will require that we understand skepticism

[173] As Cavell puts it in part one *The Claim of Reason*, "A formidable criticism of skepticism – as of any serious philosophy – will have to discover and alter its understanding of itself" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 48).

as marked by more than a denial that knowledge of a certain kind is possible. Indeed, we can find a hint of the surprising depth and breadth of Cavell's vision of skepticism in the epigraph above, where Cavell writes that, since the period of modern European philosophy, "*much of subsequent philosophy* – professional, academic philosophy at any rate – *has retained the skepticism but lost the route to God.*"[174] In philosophizing in the West since the European Enlightenment, Cavell suggests, we have retained the skepticism, but lost Descartes' route *out* of skepticism through God. What does this mean? What is skepticism?

In this chapter, I draw on the new, Cavell-inspired framework for thinking about skepticism provided by Jim Conant. Following Conant, I present Cavellian skepticism as a dialectical, conceptual space of philosophical questioning which we can come to recognize as having a recognizable structure or form, once we have learned to detect the presence of that space once we are in it.[175] On this view of what skepticism is, it is a "dialectical space" because there is room for multiple, even competing philosophical positions (or perhaps only *apparently* competing positions) within the dialectical space of skepticism. This is one main point of contrast, which I draw out in various ways throughout this chapter, with what we just called the "traditional framework" for thinking about skepticism, in which skepticism is understood as and defined by the *denial* that knowledge of some philosophical kind or another is possible.[176] Indeed I will say in this chapter that Hobbes participated in the dialectical space of skepticism – although he was by no means a skeptic *or* anti-skeptic by traditional lights.

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[174] Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 267.
[175] Conant has identified nine features and two varieties but has also suggested that there are others.
[176] I mean, and take Conant to mean, all of this as an expansion of comments in Cavell's work such as this one: that Cavell "takes the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 46).

But this will take some explaining. How can a particular "anti-skeptical" affirmation that knowledge is indeed possible be even *conceptually* called "skepticism" – at least without radically changing or just stipulating the definition? To begin to see why skepticism is not defined by the simple affirmation or denial of a certain kind of philosophical knowledge, it may be useful to mark the difference between the Cavellian and the traditional frameworks for thinking about skepticism in another way. On the one hand, the skeptic's denial that we ever know with certainty (the meanings of words, the nature of real objects or the self) may be understood as saying simply "that dogmatic certainty is not attainable, and that one should tolerate differing views because of this."[177] That's how Richard H. Popkin, the great historian of skepticism of the European Early Modern period of philosophy, understood it: here, the skeptic's model or degree of certainty appears conceptually stable and meaningful, but simply out of reach for us.[178] For Popkin skeptical doubts can bring us to a place of intellectual modesty. And there are of course significant ethical and practical benefits to a modesty about the certainty of one's actions and beliefs. One way of thinking about this position, as I will put it later on, following Cavell, is that here skepticism threatens but does not overwhelm; we have made a certain kind of peace with the skeptical threat.

On the other hand, if modern skepticism, at least since the European Enlightenment and the rise of the new science, can induce a form of intellectual modesty, it also has a much darker, even debilitating side.[179] We might put it like this:

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[177] Richard Popkin, "Skepticism and Modernity" in *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension Between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. Tom Sorrell, 15–32 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 20.
[178] See Popkin, "Introduction" and "The Intellectual Crisis of the Reformation" in *The History of Skepticism*.
[179] Recall Hume's confession in his *Treatise of Human Nature*: "The *intense* [sic] view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I

under the cover of skepticism, "probabilistic" or fallible reasoning and judgements of the sort we must rely on each day may come to seem – well, not *just* those things – but inescapably unsatisfying, corrupted, or false.[180] By these lights, the "spirit" in which the traditional skeptic denies that we know (that there are objects in front of us, that words are meaningful, that another is in pain) is both cause and effect of a *rejection*, and not just a modesty about, probabilistic reasoning. In Cavell's philosophy, "skepticism" does not (just) remind us that the felt, ordinary life of our judgements and assertions are governed by probabilities, but also rejects, denies, or annihilates the very possibility of accepting or trusting that life – which is not to say *blindly* accepting it, but rather something like "giving our experience a voice," "letting things matter to us," as Cavell will often put it. Skepticism rejects, or wards off, the felt life of our ordinary perceptual, judging, and cognitive capacities, and the world of experience and thinking they give rise to.[181] This second, darker aspect of skepticism, which to use yet another formulation of Cavell's, takes probabilistic reasoning as a *barrier* rather than a *condition* for cognitive life, or sees those conditions as barriers – is what I think Conant's Cavellian framework

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am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me?" (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition,* eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007], 1.4.7).

[180] A deeply related essay to which I am indebted for these ideas is Andrea Kern, "Why Do Our Reasons Come to An End?" in *Varieties of Skepticism: Essays After Kant, Wittgenstein, and Cavell,* eds. James F. Conant and Andrea Kern, 81–104 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). Kern, among other things, makes a distinction in that essay between two kinds of finitude: finitude with respect to the ever-present possibility of error, and finitude with respect to being the sort of creature that must receive sensory impressions. Perhaps the above distinction between two kinds of skepticism maps somewhat onto Kern's distinction between two kinds of finitude.

[181] Cf. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Stroud writes, after rehearsing the argument from illusion in Descartes's First Meditation: "With this thought, if he is right, Descartes has lost the whole world" (Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, 12).

teaches us to identify in philosophizing.[182] It is not defined by a single philosophical position, affirmative or negative (or even a particular philosophical issue or topic, but that's another story) – but by something like a rejection of the way in which the felt, ordinary life of our judgments and assertions partake of and help to constitute a human conceptual world.[183]

But that kind of grand claim – that skepticism is marked by a rejection of an ability to let things matter to us, even "a rejection of the human," as Cavell has said– will hardly be satisfying in a philosophical mood. So, the question may naturally arise for us: if skepticism is not marked or defined just by a negative response to the skeptic's wondering "can we know?", then how can we tell we're in a skeptical space when we're in one? What are some marks and features of being in what Cavell recognized as a skeptical space? Although some critics have attempted to analyze Cavell's concept of "the truth of skepticism,"[184] and others have analyzed Cavell's idea that skepticism is a standing threat to the human mind and that writers as diverse as Wittgenstein and Emerson wrote in constant confrontation with (Cavellian) skepticism[185] – there remains, in my view, despite the growing scholarship on Cavell, a poor understanding of *what being in a skeptical space* actually looks like, for Cavell, what its marks and

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[182] Wittgenstein "wishes an acknowledgement of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the conditions of knowledge. The limitations of knowledge are no longer barriers to a more perfect apprehension, but conditions of knowledge *uberhaubt,* of anything we should call 'knowledge'" (Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy, 63).
[183] These are preliminary formulations, of course. I take my cue from Cavell's idea of skepticism as "annihilating" the world – an idea he explores in connection with Othello's murdering of Desdemona in his work on Shakespeare, both at the end of *The Claim of Reason* and in his later book on Shakespeare and skepticism, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*.
[184] Two examples are Sanford Shieh's difficult but rewarding "The Truth of Skepticism" in *Reading Cavell,* eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Part II of Stephen Mulhall's *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
[185] Steven G. Affeldt has very much tried to narrow in on the idea Cavell, and Cavell's Wittgenstein, write in constant confrontation with skepticism. For a recent essay by Affeldt taking on this theme, see Affeldt, "The Normativity of the Natural."

features are. For a foundational and difficult part of Cavell's philosophy is that our entanglement with what he called "skepticism" may not be self-evident to us. If we want to do more than just emptily repeat or cite Cavell's claim, after his death, that skepticism pervades modern thought, including modern philosophy, since the European Enlightenment, then we will want repeatable, consistent ways to identify that we're in a skeptical space when we're in one. And yet very little work has been done on this extremely significant point.

A major exception in this regard is James Conant. In recent work, as I would interpret that work,[186] Conant has helped make explicit Cavell's implicit sensitivity to skepticism, uncovering a framework of marks and features by which one might learn to discern the presence of skepticism in (one's) thinking as well as patterns by which philosophical entanglements with skepticism tend to proceed.[187] One basic underlying thought is that engagements with (this broader sense of) skepticism have a consistent and recognizable shape; and yet until we become attuned to that shape, we may fail to recognize when we have become entangled with skepticism and thus fail to see what the consequences of that entanglement are.

In this chapter, I draw on Conant's framework to argue that once we *learn* to recognize the structure or form of the dialectical space of skepticism, we can see it structuring foundational debates in natural philosophy and metaphysics in the Early Modern period of European Philosophy. Drawing out Cavell's thought in the epigraph that early modern philosophy kicks off or intensifies a certain form of skepticism, this

[186] I do not claim that Conant would necessarily agree that his work should be characterized in exactly this way. Although I might add that, in informal conversations, he has acknowledged Cavell's deep influence on him, it is by no means

[187] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 3.

chapter applies Conant's and Cavell's analysis of skepticism to a key figure in the history of philosophy, someone who is not a "skeptic" according to the traditional paradigm of skepticism: Thomas Hobbes. I focus on Hobbes' natural philosophy and metaphysics and argue that the form or spirit in which Hobbes raises questions about knowledge takes a skeptical shape, a shape that Cavell and Conant's framework in fact predicts.

This chapter offers the very first, to my knowledge, rigorous attempt to show that a canonical philosopher of European Enlightenment thought (who is *not* a skeptic according to the skepticism' traditional or paradigmatic self-understanding) is deeply entangled in what Cavell called skepticism. Ultimately, I argue that the cause/effect relation plays, for Hobbes' natural philosophy, an analogous role to God in Descartes' *Meditations*, providing a *materialist* rather than *divine* response to the threat of skepticism, an attempt at a kind of theoretical reconstruction of the world of our ordinary faculties after skepticism has denied that world. In making this argument in this way I aim to (1) support Cavell's proposal that (what he calls) skepticism pervades modern thought and modern philosophy; (2) to generally support Jim Conant's framework for furthering Cavell's project of identifying skeptical spaces as they occur in philosophizing; and (3) to transform our understanding of Hobbes's natural philosophy by showing how the shape of Hobbes's metaphysics of space and time can be predicted by Cavell and Conant's framework.[188]

[188] I thus aim to bridge two or three fairly well-established scholarly subfields: metaphysics in the European Early Modern period, especially metaphysics about space and time; Hobbes studies; and debates about skepticism and Cavellian skepticism.

Setting the Skeptical Scene

Philosophers of the late scholastic and early modern periods in Europe generally debated space and time in tandem, often through a kind of argument by analogy: what applies to space also applies to time.[189] We find this in Book One of Hume's Treatise and in the Transcendental Aesthetic of Kant's first critique, for example. [190] Canonical early modern thinkers, operating within a deeply Christian worldview, were arguably less interested in the *qualities* or *features* of space and time, however, than in a set of questions around what one might call the *metaphysical status* of space and time. Although Hobbes, Hume and Kant, for example were interested in questions such as whether space and time were composed of finite or infinite parts (or whether we should reserve the term "infinite" only for God), and whether each part of space and time was divisible or indivisible, these questions about the features of space and time were typically secondary concerns.[191] They were more interested in questions like whether "*the human"* – taking their own experience as unproblematically authoritative – "idea" of space was relational and subjective or whether it was absolute and objective. They were more interested – especially the early modern empiricists and those who

[189] Nicholas Jolley recently wrote that" "philosophers up to the time of Kant tended to debate the nature of space and time in tandem…philosophical theories that seem primarily tailored to space are often said to apply mutatis mutandis to the case of time" (Nicholas Jolley, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Donald Rutherford, 128–29 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 128–29; quoted in Geoffrey Gorham, "Hobbes on the Reality of Time," *Hobbes Studies* 27, no. 1 (2014), 80–81). Cees Leijenhorst makes the same point, but for different reasons. See Cees Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism: The Late Aristotelian Setting of Thomas Hobbes' Natural Philosophy* (Boston: Brill, 200), 101–102.

[190] We also find the space/time analogy in other key texts in the history of philosophy – in Husserl's *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness,* for example. "What is meant by the exclusion of Objective time will perhaps become still clearer if we draw a parallel with space, since space and time exhibit so many noted and significant analogies" (Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness,* trans. James S. Churchill, ed. Martin Heidegger [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964], 23).

[191] All three thinkers, for example, did not question whether time was *successive* in nature. They assumed that time was inseparable from a sense of "before and after," and therefore inseparable from motion.

responded to them – in the *relation* between our mental ideas of space and time and the nature of space and time "themselves." They were interested, in other words, in the relationship between what is "internal" to the mind and what depends on the human mind for it's being, on the one hand; and what is external to the mind and what does not depend on the mind for it's being, on the other hand. Newton is famous for positing, in this sense, "absolute" space and time: container-like entities in which bodies and objects exist, while Kant understood space and time as mind-dependent *Anschauungsformen* or forms of Appearance, through which we cannot but perceive of bodies and objects.[192]

As the core of what Hobbes called "the first grounds of natural philosophy," then, the inquiry into space and time was a kind of entry way into broader questions about the relationship between thought and reality for many canonical early modern thinkers.[193] The position a given philosopher took on the "metaphysical status" of space and time – the relation between the ideas of space and time and reality – foreshadows the position they will take on the broader metaphysical question of the relation between mind and world. Hume's *Treatise,* for example, proceeds from the idea of space, to the idea of time, to his much more general and famous claim about existence: that "the idea of existence… is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent" (that is, the difference between the *idea* of existence and the *idea* of "external existence" is a distinction "without any real difference.")[194] In other words it was Hume's investigation of space which led him to claim that the concept of existence adds nothing to our

[192] For this claim (as in much of my understanding Hobbes's thought on space and time) I am indebted to Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Arisotelianism*, 101.
[193] I restrict my claim, for now, to being about the order and progression of these key philosophical texts: I haven't tried to argue that it is something intrinsic to philosophical investigations of space and time which opens the door to metaphysics. But I do mean to suggest that claim for a site of future work which takes on current debates about the nature of space and time.
[194] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.2.6, at p. 48.

impressions and ideas. And Kant's First Critique proceeds from the Transcendental Aesthetic (his investigation into space and time) – in which he claims that space and time are forms of appearance of bodies – to a more general inquiry into synthetic a priori propositions.[195] In other words, the Transcendental Aesthetic lays out the first key domain of Kant's transcendental idealism. And for Hobbes, too, space and time are the "first grounds of natural philosophy"; his philosophical investigation of the metaphysical status of, and our epistemic access to, space and time served as entry ways into broader questions about the gap between internal ideas and external bodies.[196]

If it is right that space and time were gateways for broader metaphysical questions for these canonical early modern philosophers, then – and this is the key point – it also follows that a philosopher's position on the metaphysical status of space and time played a key role in determining early modern philosophers' positions on a (version of) idealism, realism, transcendental idealism, and so forth. That is, the metaphysical question about the subjective or objective nature of space and time and the relationship between these two spheres is deeply entwined in the disagreements between realism, idealism, anti-realism, and so forth. To simplify things a bit: If we think we have access *only* to ideas or mental representations of space and time, then we probably endorse a species of idealism or "phenomenalism." If we concede that we not have access to the nature of externally existing things and also that those representations are fundamentally distorting, then we probably endorse, not only a

[195] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. and eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B73 ("Conclusion of the Transcendental Aesthetic").
[196] My point for now is just that inquiring into space and time was an entry way into inquiring about (different forms of) the gap which has opened up between the way the world appears to us and the way it actually is. Of course, it's a separate question what Hobbes's (or anyone else's) position within this dialectical space actually *was*.

species of idealism, but also a species of what is commonly called external world skepticism and/or anti-realism. (Thus the *skeptic,* as traditionally called, would have "won.") And if we find a way to bridge the gap and gain access to things as they exist outside of the human representational schema – as it were strained and purified of human representational schema – then we probably endorse a version of realism.

These are classical questions, one might even say foundational questions, for modern philosophy. And obviously I have left nearly all exegetical and theoretical questions unanswered, providing little more than a frame or structure.[197] But the aim has not been to do justice to the complexity of any particular philosopher's position. Rather, I have tried to show that for early modern European philosophers, space and time were entranceways for broader metaphysical questions. The following section suggests that these apparently opposed, arguably foundational metaphysical questions are entangled with what Conant, following Cavell, calls "the dialectical space" of skepticism.

The "Dialectical Space" of Skepticism

In discussing the "metaphysical status" of the ideas of space and time above, I have been discussing a conceptual space of philosophical questioning about the relationship between thought and reality that undergoes extensive analysis in the work of the later Wittgenstein and in the writings of Cavell. In other words, the thought is that *this conceptual space* of metaphysical perplexity about space and time is a paradigm historical case of what Cavell and his best critics have identified as the dialectical space

[197] The sort of "realism" I have outlined is surely a caricature: no contemporary "realist" would insist that for an idea to connect up with reality, it must represent or picture reality perfectly.

of philosophical skepticism. It's a "dialectical" space because the concept of "skepticism" contains enough room for competing philosophical positions – one can be a "realist" *or* an "anti-realist" about space and time and still be entangled with this skeptical space – rather than just one abnegatory position; and it's a *conceptual* kind of space rather than, say, the 3-dimensional kind of space whose presence to the mind is required for measuring the dimensions of a room. Finally, it's a "paradigm" historical case because space and time mark, I have argued, "entranceways" into this form of metaphysical questioning for the early moderns.[198] In other words, the claim is this: that all of these apparently *different* positions about the metaphysical status of space and time have something in common (though what that is remains to be seen), and that they are entangled with Cavell calls skepticism.

Here is Jim Conant on the "dialectical space" of skepticism:

> According to this unconventional idiom, the term "skepticism" (and it's variants, such as "Cartesian skepticism or "Kantian skepticism") therefore refers not just to one particular sort of philosophical *position* (i.e., that held by one another sort of skeptic) but rather to the wider *dialectical space within which philosophers occupying a range of apparently opposed philosophical positions* (such as 'realism,' 'idealism, 'coherentism', etc.) engage one another, while seeking a stable way to answer the skeptic's question in the affirmative rather than (as the skeptic himself does) in the negative.[199]

Skepticism in this radically redefined sense thus refers to a particular mode or pitch of questioning the world and our relation in it – a mode of questioning "the relationship" between thought and reality – and not just to a particular denial that knowledge is

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[198] I am not denying that, in tandem with this view of Cavellian skepticism, one can make historical sense of this descent into skepticism. One way of making historical sense of the importance of space and time for European early modern philosophers would be to say that if you see philosophy as a foundation for the "new science" of Bacon and Galileo, then space and a time would be the "conceptual pair that function as the basis" of that philosophy, because all bodies are *in* space and time. So, it will be particularly important to understand the nature of space and time in order, as Descartes put it, for philosophy to supply the new science with a "firm foundation."

[199] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 3.

possible. There is a phenomenological sense in which, when asking these metaphysical questions, we become "sealed" off from the world or the world "withdraws." The thought, perhaps, as we might paraphrase it, is that certain questions, once raised, both perpetuate and are already an expression of this field or space that is called skepticism.[200] And perhaps now we can say: for Cavell, all of this rich, dense, disciplinarily foundational philosophical work comes down to an attempt to recover the world lost through the skeptic's way of questioning of whether we have knowledge of it, whether it connects up with "reality" or "the real." From a Cavellian perspective, European Early Modern philosophy can be seen as an attempt to reorient the relation to the world once that world has been lost by the decline of religious faith and the rise of the new science, and each philosopher would have their own method for recovering the world; the dialectical space of skepticism names the conceptual space in which this attempt takes place (in philosophy). Hobbes's particular attempt to regain a world lost by skepticism is a particularly interesting one, I think, for reasons that Conant's framework brings out.

Hobbes's Metaphysics of Space and Time

In this section I argue that Hobbes's infamous "world annihilation" thought experiment is effectively a portal for the dialectical space for skepticism – both historically and insofar as we, as philosophical readers of Hobbes, also enter that

[200] This is one of the guiding ideas, as I understand it, behind many of the approaches to skepticism collected in Conant and Kern's edited volume, *Skepticism in Context* (2014). Elek Lane has recently attempted to fill in this idea with regard to rule-following skepticism, writing that "Wittgenstein…aims to demonstrate the inevitability of being led to a particular kind of philosophical dead-end once one has begun the [rule-following] dialectic" (Elek Lane, "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Considerations," *The Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 6, no. 1 [2017], 54).

space.[201] And just to offer up an unfinished thought, if we think of Hobbes's philosophy, like Descartes's, as in some important respects marking a boundary into modernity, and modernity as in some ways saturated by skepticism, then the thought experiment catapults us into modernity and skepticism together.

"In the teaching of natural philosophy," Hobbes writes in *Elements of Philosophy*, "I cannot begin better…than from *privation;* that is, from feigning the world to be annihilated."[202] And if we were to "feign" the annihilation of the world except for one man whom "I except [sic] from the universal annihilation," Hobbes asks, then what would remain?

> I say, there would remain to that man ideas of the world, and of all such bodies as he had, before their annihilation… that is to say, the memory and imagination of magnitudes, motions, sounds, colours, &c. as also of their order and parts. All which things, though they be nothing but ideas of phantasms, happening internally to him that imagineth; yet they will appear as if they were external, and not at all depending upon any power of mind. And these are the things to which he would give names…if we do but observe diligently what it is we do when we consider and reason, we shall find, that though all things be still remaining in the world, *yet we compute nothing but our own phantasms.*[203]

The thought experiment is supposed to astonish or shock us into a discovery; and both this peculiar form of philosophical "astonishment" and the corresponding sense of discovery are signs of entering a skeptical space.[204] The skeptical astonishment, in this case, sets up a contrast between "what all men (including us in our non-philosophical moments) take to be so" and what really *is* so. More specifically, it looks like this:

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[201] Readers have Hobbes have long recognized the pivotal role that the thought experiment plays in Hobbes's philosophy, but (in my view) fundamentally misconstrued what that role is. Cees Leijenhorst (*Mechanisation of Aristotelianism,* 2002) tells us that the thought experiment "illustrates the point… [that] first philosophy deals with body *qua* understood or conceived," that is, with "our conceptions of bodies, rather than with bodies themselves." Geoffrey Gorham ("Hobbes on the Reality of Time," 2014) tells us, additionally, that it is "a thought experiment that will later play an important role in his imaginary conceptions of space and time." This is true – but what is the importance of *that?*
[202] Hobbes, *De Corpore,* 2.2.7.
[203] Ibid., 2.2.7.
[204] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 484.

although we speak of Bodies *as if* we were referring to their external, mind-independent existence, Hobbes says that what we actually refer to, when we ordinarily speak of bodies, are "nothing but Ideas & Phantasms" of those externally occurring things. We speak *as if* we were making claims about external, mind-independent, things, Hobbes thinks, but in fact all we have access to are subjective representations of those things. The thought experiment sets up an opposition between a mode of mere appearance (Ideas & Phantasms) and a mode of reality (bodies which are external to us).[205] This opposition might seem to, but does not in fact, jeopardize (what Hobbes thinks of as) his materialism, for Hobbes understands "phantasms" in two senses, both of which are compatible with being mere "matter in motion" – a thought we will return to shortly.[206]

The very first thing I would like to say about the "world annihilation" thought experiment which gets Hobbes's philosophical investigation off the ground is that it maps uncannily well onto a description of skepticism which Cavell gives in part two of *The Claim of Reason*:

> Once a philosopher finds a Cartesian investigation to show that all we can be certain of is something other than the existence of objects…then the question arises in a new way as to how our claims about material objects are to be based, and this may lead to a reconvening of the *meaning* of our claims about them, a reconception of what a claim about an object *is*….[207]

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[205] As commentators such as Leijenhorst have noticed, in order for this to even potentially or seem to work, Hobbes needs his conception of memory as less vibrant and less immediately present sense impressions; that is, he needs his conception of memory as what he calls "decaying sense." Only then can Hobbes establish the required sort of identity between past sensory impressions, which would remain the same even without an external world, and present ones, which accordingly would also remain the same even without an external world.

[206] For an excellent discussion of the two ways in which Hobbes views ideas or "phantasms," see Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism*, 53–55. The basic thought, as will become important later in the paper, is that ideas are both representations of external things *and* brain-states.

[207] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 232.

If we separate these claims and map them onto Hobbes's way of doing things, what we find is an uncanny symmetry, although there is no indication that Cavell had Hobbes in mind:

Cavell: "All we can be certain of is something other than the existence of objects"
Hobbes: All we can be certain of, or all we have access to, are subjective representations of things. "*Yet we compute nothing but our own phantasms."*

Cavell: "The question arises in a new way as to how our claims about material objects are to be based."
Hobbes: Claims about material objects are *based on* nothing but these subjective representations of things, since they are all we have access to. "*All which things, though they be nothing but Ideas & Phantasms…*"

Cavell: "This may lead to a reconvening of the *meaning* of our claims about them, a re-conception of what a claim about an object *is*…"
Hobbes: All we *talk* about, when we talk about things, are subjective ideas of things, not the external things themselves. The meaning of ordinary terms is nothing but these subjective ideas, even though all men *think* they are referring to something outside of the (or their) mind. "*And these are the things to which he would give names…"*

At one level, if this right, Cavell's passage from the *Claim of Reason* describes the shape of Hobbes's thinking. At another level, however, it cannot really be a description of *Hobbes* because there is no textual evidence that Cavell had Hobbes in mind at all. So, it

would be better to say that Cavell's analysis *predicts* Hobbes's thinking here. But recall that according to the "traditional paradigm" the skeptic is someone who denies or doubts that knowledge of a certain sort is possible; the anti-skeptic is someone who answers that doubt and/or denial. Hobbes does not understand himself to be doing either of those two things: he neither affirms *nor* denies a skeptical question, for example, of the kind: "can I know of the existence of the external world?" And yet, if this analysis has so far been right, Hobbes's natural philosophy, his metaphysics of bodies in space and time, insofar as he affirms that we can know nothing except for "the mere Phantasms" of those bodies, maps *uncannily* well onto Cavell's descriptions of skeptical space. The fact that Cavell's thinking predicts, or has understood, the shape of Hobbes's thinking here even though Hobbes does not even understand himself to be engaging with "the skeptic," lends support to and fills out Cavell's claim, as in the epigraph to this chapter, that skepticism pervades, even sets the terms of, early modern European philosophy. But there is much more to be said about this.

Conant's Kantian and Cartesian Features of Skepticism in Hobbes's Metaphysics About Space and Time

In this section, Jim Conant's diagnostic framework sharpens the focus on the signs of entering the dialectical space of skepticism as they appear in Hobbes's thinking. Conant's framework, like Cavell's, not only predicts the shape of Hobbes's thinking, but it also allows us to understand the peculiar role of the cause/effect relationship in Hobbes's natural philosophy: as a materialist response to the threat of skepticism, as a portal *out* of skepticism, as a spring which allows Hobbes to reconnect himself to, or regain, the world lost in skepticism.

But before we turn to Conant's framework, I would like to offer a word about what it means to continue Cavell's project of recognizing "skepticism," in this broader sense of the word, in the history of Western or European-inherited philosophy. In Cavell's work, I would argue that there is no clear way of proceeding from the point of reflective symmetry between Hobbes and Cavell identified in the last section. That is, Cavell did not offer, and he may not have thought it worthwhile to offer, a full-blooded set of diagnostic criteria for what skepticism actually looks like in philosophy, other than in occasional passages such as the one just pulled from *The Claim of Reason*. One way of thinking about why this might be would be to say that although Cavell developed in his philosophical practice (especially after *The Claim)* an exquisite and sometimes rather dramatic sensitivity to the appearance of a skeptical problem across different fields or areas of philosophy, this sensitivity remained mostly implicit (notwithstanding the occasional passage such as the one I just used to match Hobbes's descent into skepticism). On my reading, it has been Conant, perhaps more than any other reader of Cavell, who has made explicit and expanded Cavell's implicit sensitivity to skepticism, uncovering a set of features by which one might learn to discern the presence of skepticism in one's philosophy and patterns by which skeptical entanglements tend to proceed, but also distinguishing between two different kinds or logics of skeptical problematics: "Cartesian" and "Kantian." So, it is to that framework that we now turn, in order to show that Hobbes's metaphysics about space and time exhibits, not just features of Cavellian skepticism as in the preceding section, but also "an intermingling of Cartesian and Kantian [skeptical] features within a single philosophical

problematic."[208] This just deepens, I think, the general claim of this chapter: that Cavellian skepticism pervades Early Modern thought and that a thinker like Hobbes can be usefully, richly, and accurately interpreted as developing a particular response to the threat of skepticism in and through their philosophy.

To bring the dialectical space of skepticism into sharper focus, Conant offers us two different forms or varieties of skepticism with parallel sets of features. He calls these forms or varieties "Kantian Skepticism" and "Cartesian Skepticism" respectively; but the terminology can be confusing, and it is important to note that the claim is not that Kant and Descartes were themselves "skeptics" in something like the traditional sense of the term (which would imply that both of their respective projects of defeating skepticism simply failed, which is not what's being argued here). The idea is rather that these two forms or problematics are labeled Kantian and Cartesian in order to mark "the historical moment at which their [these forms'] overall philosophical shape[s] first because visible." [209] In other words, Conant's thought is that these problematics are *fully* present in Descartes' and Kant's respective philosophies; he uses their texts as something like paradigm cases to help delineate the features of each, while affirming that bits and pieces of both skeptical spaces are present in other thinkers. Conant therefore notes that he does *not* denominate these problematics "Cartesian" and "Kantian" in order to mark "the point of their earliest philosophical inception" or the point of "their last philosophical flicker."[210] In this sense, the framework calls out for an analysis of a philosopher like Hobbes whose work precedes Kant chronologically but whose work

[208] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 23.
[209] Ibid., 24
[210] Ibid.

contains Kantian skeptical features, like Hobbes, as it calls out for an analysis of a philosopher cotemporaneous with Descartes, like Hobbes, whose work contains Cartesian skeptical features but whose solution and response does not resemble Descartes's. And as I hope to show, Hobbes was not only out of touch with the presence of a dialectical space of skepticism in his philosophizing, but he was also unaware of the distinction between forms of skepticism that Conant's framework allows us to bring out – both of which Conant identifies as causes of philosophical obscurity and confusion.[211]

With those prefatory remarks aside, let's start with what Conant calls skepticism about perception.[212] "The Cartesian skeptic…worries about the transition from a sensory experience to a judgement, from a thought to…its truth value."[213] That is, the Cartesian skeptic is concerned with the *veridicality* of ideas, thoughts, or perceptions. With regard to perception in particular, the Cartesian skeptic asks, "How can I know that [external] things are as my senses present them as being?"[214] The Cartesian skeptic about perception comes to see that they can have experiences which are "indistinguishable from the one [I have]…such as when I am dreaming, and yet things are not as they appear."[215] The outer world – the way things *are,* the "nature of external things," etc. – is hidden behind a veil of perception. The gap which the Cartesian skeptic therefore seeks to bridge is from their own perceptions to the outer world.[216]

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[211] "An intermingling of Cartesian and Kantian [skeptical] features within a single philosophical problematic," Conant notes, is often a symptom of philosophical confusion (ibid., 23).
[212] Again, perception is just of many areas of philosophy in which Conant argues philosophers are engaged with skeptical questioning.
[213] Ibid., 5.
[214] Ibid., 8.
[215] Ibid., 8
[216] Ibid., 8.

The Cartesian gap is discernible in Hobbes's basic starting point for natural philosophy, as we saw: that "we compute nothing but our own phantasms," as Hobbes says, though "all men think" we compute the bodies which phantasms are phantasms *of*.[217] And that there *is* such a gap in Hobbes's philosophy no serious scholar of Hobbes work who I have read has denied. The two corresponding skeptical questions of a *Cartesian* variety which we find in Hobbes's metaphysics of space and time – both of which constitute arenas of contemporary debate, though not as skeptical problems, among Hobbes scholars – are accordingly:

(1) Cartesian Skepticism About Perception of Space

Does Hobbes' philosophy have a real/objective counterpart to the "phantasm" of *space*? If so, what is the nature of that real/objective counterpart?

(2) Cartesian Skepticism About Perception of Time

Does Hobbes' philosophy have a real/objective counterpart to the "phantasm" of *time*? If so, what is the nature of that real/objective counterpart?

Faced with these questions about the gap between our ideas or "phantasms" of space and time and the reality of space and time – questions which will extend, for Hobbes, to our phantasms of *any* particular body in space and time – Hobbes's philosophy threatens to flower into what Conant would call a Cartesian kind of skeptical paradox. That is, in order to know that an "Idea or Phantasm," as Hobbes calls it, is *really* as it

[217] Hobbes, *De Corpore,* 2.7 Thus as Geoffrey Gorham ("Hobbes on the Reality of Time, 2014) writes, "there is always a legitimate question whether our spatial images correspond to their external causes," or as Leijenhorst (*Mechanisation of Aristotelianism,* 2002) puts it, first philosophy "occupies itself with our conceptions of bodies, rather than with bodies themselves." The threat of collapsing into idealism, or even utter anti-realism, given this starting point, is palpable.

appears, Hobbes needs to convince himself that those ideas are veridical: he needs to be able to bridge what Conant calls "the Cartesian gap" between perception and knowledge. If Hobbes cannot find a way to bridge that gap, then he is left with a Cartesian form of skeptical solipsism and/or anti-realism – this is what Conant calls the Cartesian paradox in skepticism about perception.

If we now turn to Kantian skepticism, the other, parallel logic or problematic of skepticism which Conant charts, we find that Hobbes, after the world-annihilation thought experiment, is equally and simultaneously trapped within what Conant calls a Kantian skeptical problematic. The Kantian skeptic is concerned less with the veridicality – the correlation with "the way things are" – than with the *intelligibility* of our ideas, thoughts, or perceptions. That is, the Kantian skeptic worries less about the accuracy of what is presented and more about "how the sensory apparatus of the mind can so much as present things as being a certain way."[218] With regard to perception in particular, the Kantian skeptic asks: "How is it possible that an external object's impinging on the senses could appear as the sort of thing which is 'about' anything at all – let alone furnish "the sort of things which could provide anyone with a reason for believing anything?"[219] The gap the Kantian skeptic about perception seeks to bridge is from a mechanistic and/or biological account of impact on the sensory organs to worldliness as such (or if you prefer, from mere sensory input to "sensory consciousness," to the presence of so much as mental images *of* a "something.") One of the many relations between these two problematics about skepticism is, Conant notes, that the Cartesian skeptic appears to take for granted something which the Kantian

[218] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 14.
[219] Ibid., 14.

skeptic brings into question. The Cartesian skeptic asks, in brief, whether a perception is veridical, responsible to the way things are, whether it corresponds with reality, etc. The Kantian skeptic asks rather "how such an appearance is so much as possible,"[220] how blind sensibility can turn into the sort of thing which we can form judgements *about* (how the conceptual nothingness of interactions with the sensory organs can become a discursive something). The very possibility of a perception's being "non-veridical" or 'false" requires that perception be *about* something, inform a possible thought, in the first place.

The two corresponding skeptical questions of a *Kantian* variety which we find in Hobbes's natural philosophy – both of which are also under discussion, though not as skeptical problems, in contemporary scholarship on Hobbes – are accordingly:

(3) Kantian Skepticism About Perception of Space

How is it possible, in Hobbes's philosophy, for the human mind to *present* so much as the *appearance of space*, as opposed to merely causal and blind impact on the senses? Doesn't an outer object merely impinge on the senses – how does that interaction in nature come to take the form of even an appearance *of* space?

(4) Kantian Skepticism About Perception of Time

How is it possible, on Hobbes's account, for the human mind to *present* so much as the *appearance of space*, as opposed to merely causal and blind impact on the senses? Doesn't an outer object merely impinge on the senses –

[220] Ibid., 15.

> how does that interaction in nature come to take the form of even an appearance *of* space?[221]

Faced with these questions about the gap between the causal interactions of bodies on our sensory apparatus and the ideas or appearance of space and time – questions which will extend, for Hobbes, to our "Phantasms" of anything in space and time – Hobbes is entangled in a space of questioning that threatens to flower into another, different kind of skeptical paradox. Recall that the Cartesian paradox that Hobbes's thinking encountered faced the threat of a lack of *veridicality* of those ideas, the threat of a failure of ideas to link up to the world. Now it seems as if what threatens is an absence of so much as *any* idea, an absence of so much as the unity of any thought whatsoever; the threat of skepticism here is a threat of utter nothingness. (A way of getting at this would be to imagine one's own experience as caused by a series of random synaptic or neuronal transactions whose interplay remained mysterious.) In order to regain the ordinary worldliness threatened by *Kantian* skepticism, Hobbes needs to be able to bridge what Conant calls "the Kantian gap" from "sensory blindness to sensory consciousness."[222] If he cannot find a way to bridge that Kantian gap, then Hobbes is left entangled in a dialectical space of Kantian skepticism that is even *worse* than the threat of Cartesian skeptical solipsism and/or anti-realism. The Kantian paradox that

[221]These questions are also active areas of scholarly debate and conversation among Hobbes scholars. I will just give one example. A recent paper by Edward Slowik in *Hobbes Studies* frames its subject matter as interrogating "the manner by which Hobbes reckons that imaginary space is obtained from our experience of the world" (Edward Slowik, "Hobbes on the Phantasm of Space," *Hobbes Studies* 27 [2014]). The paper notes that the manner by which imaginary space is "obtained from our experience" (the Kantian gap) has "elicited many divergent interpretations" and gives three such interpretations. The paper concludes that "it is still unclear what specific cognitive functions are involved and how." Slowik's horizon of interpretation of Hobbes is entangled with Kantian skepticism about perception.
[222] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 15.

threatens Hobbes, once he asks the question of how causal interaction on the sensory organs comes to be an idea of or in space and time, is a kind of nothingness or lifelessness, in which the possibility that threatens is one in which Hobbes cannot give a satisfying philosophical account of how sensory input comes to have as the form of an appearance *of* anything at all.

Cause and Effect as the "Bridge" Across Kantian and Cartesian Gaps

Now what is interesting and perhaps most peculiar about Hobbes, this next section suggests, is not that he has failed to recognize that his philosophical thinking has taken on the features of a Cavellian, dialectical space of skepticism. Nor is it that Hobbes has not distinguished between the two different kinds of skeptical questions (the one about how appearances of the world are so much as possible, the other about whether appearances are just *mere* appearances.) If Cavell and Conant are correct, to have failed to recognize the shape of a skeptical problematic is quite common and has been common for literally hundreds of years of Western philosophy, and to have failed to recognize the difference between Kantian and Cartesian varieties is even more common. No, what is most interesting about Hobbes's response to the threat of skepticism is that he tries – and fails – to cross both the Kantian and Cartesian gaps simultaneously, and with one weighty philosophical bridge: the cause/effect relationship.[223] In a word, Hobbes sees "ideas or Phantasms" as effects of two causes: Real, external bodies, and Real, internal bodies. The relation of cause and effect here purports to close both the Kantian and Cartesian gaps – from world to idea and from brain to idea. I believe that

[223] Hobbes, *De Corpore*, 1.1.2.

more sophisticated versions of Hobbes's move, given how the period in which Hobbes was writing kicks off scientific modernity, still pervade much of contemporary thinking in philosophy of mind.

In Hobbes's natural philosophy, the simplistic, mechanistic cause-and-effect relationship, pictured sometimes as a link or chain of one event leading to the next with limited or no confounding variables, plays a fundamental role in Hobbes' natural philosophy, as nearly every contemporary commentator on Hobbes's metaphysics or natural philosophy has noted. In fact, in *De Corpore,* the first book of *Elements of Philosophy*, Hobbes even identifies philosophy with knowledge of cause and effect, writing: "Philosophy is such knowledge of effects or appearances, as we acquire by true ratiocination from the knowledge we have we have of their first causes or generation."[224]

But Hobbes's critics, even the most careful, have also noted something very confused or perhaps confusing about the role of the cause and effect relationship in Hobbes's thinking;[225] and here I present a new account of why this is, in relation to Cavell's rich and expansive definition of skepticism. I think that what happens in Hobbes's thinking is that he enters into a dialectical space of skepticism – without having thought through the overall shape of these problematics, and without having a philosophical strategy for how to escape it – and then must claw his way out. The cause/effect relationship is the breath of life again, the hinge or door through which Hobbes seeks to escape the dialectical space of skepticism.

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[224] Hobbes, *De Corpore,* in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, edited by Sir William Molesworth, Vol 1. (London: John Bohn, 1839) 2.2.7.

[225] For a recent example, Douglas Jesseph writes that "Hobbes' treatment of the distinction [between real and imaginary] is not as clear or extensive as one might wish" (Douglas M. Jesseph, "Hobbes on the Foundations of Natural Philosophy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, eds. Al. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra, 134–48 [New York: Oxford University Press, 2016], 2–3). Leijenhorst notes a related confusion at least twice in his text. See Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism*, p. 54 and p. 123.

In a sense, to map or chart Hobbes's thinking here from a Cavellian perspective is quick. Here is what it looks like. If "ideas are mere phantasms of matter in motion," as Hobbes thinks the world annihilation thought experiment demonstrates, as we saw, then not only does his philosophy appear trapped at the level of mere materiality (confronting him with the Kantian gap between sensory data and appearance of the world). But it would also appear trapped at the level of mere appearance (confronting him with the Cartesian gap between appearance and reality). The cause/effect relationship, however, links ideas to externally existing things (purportedly closing the Cartesian gap) *and* ideas to the materiality of the brain (purportedly closing the Kantian gap). And so by conceptualizing "ideas" as *effects* of Real things, Hobbes attempts to achieve some kind of (re)connection between those ideas and "Reality," some Cartesian bridge between mind and world – albeit a thin bridge, and only through a particular picture of the cause/effect relation. Similarly, by conceptualizing ideas as effects of internal motions of the body, Hobbes attempts to achieve some kind of (re)connection between those motions and the world of ideas, some Kantian bridge between material sensory input and worldliness as such. Thus, the two kinds of "Real Bodies" – the external and the internal – which act as causes in Hobbes's Natural Philosophy purport to close the Cartesian gap between phantasms and the world and the Kantian gap between the brain and phantasms respectively.

One way of proceeding from here would be to question whether Hobbes successfully averts the threat of skeptical paradox through the cause/effect relationship. I think he does not. There are obvious Cartesian questions still lingering about whether being an effect of a "Real Body" is enough for an idea to resemble or correspond to that

Real Body. [226] Likewise there are the problems for any broadly emergentist philosophy of mind – in a few words, the theory that the mind emerges from the brain's physical processes – that merely asserting that such a process is formed by a mechanical cause/effect relationship cannot solve.[227]

From a Cavellian perspective, however, the fact that Hobbes could not defeat the skeptic is no surprise; and in fact, it is not even all that interesting. From a Cavellian perspective, the skeptic cannot be defeated, but only lived with, coped with; and the philosophers who understand skepticism best, such as Wittgenstein, had alternative ways of responding to the skepticism, ways which are still the subject of philosophical debate. But in any case, if we read history of philosophy with Cavell, the aim of reading Hobbes's confrontation with skepticism shifts: instead of learning from Hobbes particular strategies for defeating or affirming the skeptic, we might come to understand how Hobbes's thinking is shaped by a confrontation with skepticism – why, for example, he places philosophical weights where he does. Applying Conant's framework, we might learn to notice the particular shape or form of a skeptical entanglement in a philosopher's work, and then be able to recognize commonalities between that shape and other philosophers, even writing on different subjects.

The really interesting conclusion, from the perspective of something like a "Cavellian history of philosophy," therefore, is not that Hobbes fails to close the Kantian and Cartesian gaps and avert these skeptical paradoxes. Those paradoxes remain a threat. The interesting conclusion is that the cause/effect relation returns Hobbes to the world, or returns the world in Hobbes's philosophy, which abandoned him in the

[226] Gorham "Hobbes on the Reality of Time," 90.
[227] Leijenhorst, *The Mechanisation of Aristotelianism,* 89.

dialectical space of skepticism. Thus understood in a Cavellian way, there is a parallel between Descartes's theological approach and Hobbes's material cause/effect relation: they both purport to provide a kind of assurance that there is a connection (of both the Kantian and Cartesian varieties) between ideas and the world, between what Hobbes calls "Phantasms" and "Real" things. They both play the purported role of ensuring that our concepts reach all the way to the world. But whereas Descartes attempts to reestablish this connection through God, Hobbes sought to reestablish his connection through cause and effect.

Concluding Thoughts

In the conclusion I would just like to raise one issue that comes up with thinking about Kantian skepticism about perception and also offer one insight about human mindedness that I think comes from learning to recognize the shape of skeptical problematic in one's thinking.

There is a sense in which the Kantian gap between the nothingness of unorganized causal impact on the sensory organs and the "world of appearances" of human cognitive life, unlike the Cartesian gap between that "world of appearances" and the real world as such, is not even a theoretically stable thought: there is a sense in which one cannot really *think* this thought through. Conant expresses this difficult idea, at one point, like this:

> But it is not clear what it would be to acquiesce in the existence of [a Kantian] gap. It must already be bridged (as evidenced by his present ability to exercise his capacities for perception…); and yet; as long as the threat of Kantian paradox has yet to be averted, it also appears that there is no way to bridge the gap.[228]

[228] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 35.

In Kantian skepticism, Conant writes, the mind turns with a particular violence on itself: we are questioning the mind's very capacity to form representations.[229] And yet in order to perform that questioning we require those very capacities – the mind's capacity to form representations – in question. The relationship between possibility and actuality gets twisted. We are not only questioning the mind's (actual) capacity to form representations, but also questioning the possibility of the very capacity exercised in asking the question. This is why, as I read him, Conant says that there is a sense in which philosophers in the grip of Kantian skepticism both acquiescence to the gap *and* – at the same time – fail to. What reason questions is "its own possibility."[230] We seem to be plagued with a question, as Kant himself will put it, that reason cannot answer and yet cannot dismiss.

Hobbes's apparent thought that "Meere Phantasms" or ideas are effects of motion in the brain/sensory organ exhibits, I think, this kind of "theoretical instability" symptomatic of an entanglement with Kantian skepticism. The suggestion, both Hobbes and modern, that ideas are nothing but neural events "inside" the brain, that they are mere "effects" of internal physical events – this is not, I think, a theoretically stable thought. Part of what thinking about skepticism through Cavell and Conant's frameworks allows us to understand, in other words, is that it isn't possible to affirm a strong reductionist or physicalist theory of mind, for not only does such a theory crumble as soon as we engage in practical, ordinary life, but such a standpoint cannot

[229] Ibid., 33. "Kant says (concerning what he calls) skepticism, that it is a "way of thinking, in which reason moves against itself with such violence, that it could never have arisen except in *volliger Verzweiflung* of achieving satisfaction with respect to reason's most important aspiration" (Conant quoting Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* 4:271).
[230] Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism," 34.

even be maintained – at least not without patent assumption or assertion of what *must* be the case, namely, that everything we feel, think, touch, is ultimately reducible to events inside of the head. For the reductionist/physicalist, the Kantian gap remains unbridged; he merely *asserts* that a bridge has been formed, since something *must* bridge it; the world of experience cannot just be given to us as meaningful.[231] Hobbes' specific form of materialism about ideas, like contemporary theories of mind which reduce ideas to neural events, is a response to the appearance of the Kantian skeptical gap; and if Conant is right, any such response will display a peculiar form of theoretical instability which must both employ and seek to account for the very cognitive capacities being exercised in posing the question, and yet as long as the gap remains unbridged, such an account cannot be given. And so the world, or world of appearances, shows up as meaningful *for* us, and – surprise! – we are born into experience, *in media res,* which we did not create.

[231] See Alva Noe, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

Conclusion

Cavell's Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow

I sought to show, in the first three chapters of this dissertation, the "same fact" from a variety of different perspectives: that the philosophical skeptic (in us) runs up against various human forms of life – the fact of our separateness, the fact that not all meaningful concepts are "criterial," that is, are differentiated by marks and features, the ubiquity and necessity of human cares and commitments in meaningful conceptual life, the fact that we inherit a language whose embedded meanings we did not decide on – and, interpreting these conditions as limitations, seeks to transcend them. But the absence of human forms of life does not amount to objectivity, but rather to a loss of accountability to (human) reality, to emptiness in our use of language. That is, I think, a central thread in the philosophy of Stanley Cavell.

In the fourth chapter, I sought to build on the first three to begin a different sort of task: the task of thinking *with* Cavell, of taking Cavell more as a means of interpretation than as an object of interpretation, to identify the role that the threat of skepticism played, in shaping the questions asked and the possible range of satisfactory answers, in European Early Modern philosophy and in Hobbes's thought in particular.

Moving to a conclusion, another central thread in Cavell's writing, from his first book of interrelated essays, *Must We Mean What We Say* (1969), to his last published book of essays, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2005), is that "nothing guarantees" that a piece of philosophical work will "succeed"; i.e., will succeed in unfreezing the habitual flow of ordinary concepts to reveal aspects of "experience" we had missed. In other words: "philosophy" for Cavell is not a purely descriptive term – a

word for an engagement with a particular figure, text, or problem – but a term of achievement or praise. Cavell even suggested that those writers or artists most likely to leave their historical trace as "philosophers" would be least likely to be convinced, in advance of any given endeavor, that what they were doing counted as philosophy.

In 1969, understandably, given the intellectual environment at Harvard and in the culture at large in which he was engaged, Cavell frames a version of this thought about the achievement of philosophy in terms of the presence of modernism in the arts. At that time, though conversations with his friend and the art critic Michael Fried, Cavell begins to conceive of artistic "modernism" as a form of disruption of continuity with the past of the tradition of the art form; but in contrast to many other theorists of modernism and perhaps most notably Arthur Danto, this "disruption of continuity with the tradition" did not amount to radical break, a throwing away of the past. Rather, modernism in the Cavellian and in the Friedian sense amounts to a continual, open-ended questioning about whether, and on what grounds, a work counts or does not count as a continuation of the tradition – as if this question which had perennially driven a particular artistic canon had suddenly, in 1969, become a *pressing* one for both critics and artists. Among many other things, this Cavellian-Friedian conception of modernism implies and entails a certain kind of leveling of the distinction between "categorization" and "evaluation" – such that only an achievement of the form of artistic medium counts as an instance of it.[232] Of course, saying this is not to deny that we *can* classify anything with paint sprayed on it, any piece of writing that takes up a

[232] See, for example, Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), esp. "Automatisms," Ch. 14. A version of this thought runs though *Must We Mean What We Say?*

philosophical theme, as a "painting" or as "philosophy." The thought is rather, among other things, (1) that the reception or criticism of a work of philosophy or art is part of what constitutes its worth; and (2) that we are "endlessly responsible" for the question of whether what we are doing *counts as* – for example – philosophy; and (3) that categorization, in the arts, has now become tied up with the role of evaluation.

Will Cavell's text count as "philosophy" then – and for whom, and when? This question is not yet, according to Cavell's own thinking about this question in other contexts, a very good one. Because if it is true that the meaning of a text is inextricably bound up with the criticism of that text, and vice versa, then in order to know whether Cavell's texts count as philosophy there would first have to be criticism of those texts. But if we bracket the question of the status of a thinker whose reputation never leaves the confines of the university, and concentrate instead on Cavell's desire to be read (at least for many of his texts) also by those who did not have a training in professional philosophy, then for Cavell such criticism would have to come from something like a non-academic philosophical readership, something like a "philosophical *culture*." But in the United States, as opposed to, say, France, where Cavell currently enjoys a much more publicly accepted reputation as a *philosopher,* there is no culturally recognized tradition of philosophy in the sense that we have a tradition of, say, literature, or poetry; outside of humanities departments at universities, there is no concept of "American philosophy" in the sense that we have such a concept as "American literature" or "American poetry."

Of course one might very well argue that we *do* have such a tradition; it has just not yet been recognized. But for this claim to be true one would have to elevate the scholar and professor of philosophy above the general (interested, thoughtful) public in

a way that Cavell did not agree with and that was not congenial to his philosophical thinking. Or alternatively one might argue that the search for anything like a national identity for philosophy is outdated and misplaced. But regardless of the national borders in which Cavell's philosophy could be received, the real here question is just thus: Where is the philosophical culture and the philosophical audience(s) which will determine whether Cavell's work – or inheritance and scholarship of his work – will be worth the personal, social, and institutional investment that such work requires? It is certainly not enough, Cavell thinks, following Thoreau in this regard as in others, that we have professors of philosophy. But to have philosophers we must have an audience for philosophy. If such an audience does not yet exist, it seems that we cannot even ask the question of Cavell's future yet.

It is only in the context of the question of whether there is such a thing as an audience for "American philosophy," and if there is such an audience, why it has not yet been recognized in the way that audiences for other art forms or media have been recognized, that one can understand Cavell's complex discussions of Emerson and Thoreau and his discussions of Hollywood film. The Transcendentalists' work and certain works of Hollywood film, Cavell thinks, carry within them a particular vision of the evolving conversation about what constitutes justice and what constitutes a good life, a conversation in which any interested person ought to be an equal member of – in short, a dimension of the ethical life that Cavell will come to call "Emersonian perfectionism." As is well known, far from aiming at a particular "perfected" state of being, Emersonian perfectionism calls us back to the necessity of a continuing conversation about how to live together well; perfectionism remind us, in the face of particular challenges to the justice of our laws, institutions, and distributions of wealth,

that in a democracy one is never "above reproach." Skepticism or metaphysics, in this region of Cavell's philosophical solar system at any rate, is in part the effort to transcend or wash one's hands of this ongoing conversation about justice and the good human life – to place oneself outside of that conversation, to transcend the unfinished self in that way. And so, Cavell thinks, a proper democratic or "American" tradition of philosophy would develop, not only a vision of that finite and ongoing conversation of justice and the good life, but also a set of responses to the human desire to transcend that ongoing conversation.

But here is the rub. Cavell finds such a confrontation with skepticism and an embrace of Emersonian perfectionism in Thoreau and Emerson's texts and even, in their own way, in certain key moments of Hollywood film. Yet those texts and films have not yet been recognized – despite all of their apparent acclaim and high school fan clubs -- *as* cultural artefacts with something philosophical to say. This suggests to Cavell, not that he is wrong that these texts offer such a vision of Emersonian perfectionism and establish a forgotten tradition of philosophical thought in the United States, but that the audience has not been formed which can judge as he judges, dig as he digs. If Cavell is right, then to understand his texts and the texts and films and plays that matter most to him, we would first have to come to terms with our own drive toward skepticism or metaphysics; and if this has not yet been done, then we are not yet prepared for the significance of these texts and films.

It is in something like this sense, I think, that by the end of his life, Cavell saw himself as a philosopher for the day after tomorrow. Especially in the 1990s, intellectually lonely as ever, Cavell continued to attempt to search for an audience for his own writing *with* his writing. He felt his audience had not yet come; but that when it

ever did come, they would understand a series of philosophical texts and films in a fresh light, perhaps most notably the Transcendentalists, whose full significance had not yet been unpacked.

To conclude, here is an initial attempt at a formulation of Cavellian philosophy that could have broad appeal. If it is correct to say that perception, sensory experience more generally, and even rational thought itself are "historically conditioned" – and by this mean we mean that in learning language, the human being is a being that is initiated into the cultural-biological forms of life embedded in a language – then we are inclined to think that in affirming historicity we are denying something about the *accuracy* of perception, sensory experience and rational thought. But this need not be so. Cavell's philosophy is about living with and thinking about perception and cognition *which are not in tension* with the idea of their being historically conditioned. And if that way of living as coping with finitude is possible, then the impression that we are *denying* something -- the possibility of accuracy in our judgements and claims – when we affirm the fact of our inheritance of culture and language dissolves. Said otherwise, only from within the fantasy that rational thought requires ahistorical conditions of accuracy do we experience a tension between historicity and accuracy; but this is a not a tension it is easy to walk out of. And if Cavell is right, it is a tension, in philosophizing the day after tomorrow, that there is a never a *solution* to, never a final path out of, in the sense that we mistakenly think we must choose between the possibility of accuracy and the reality of historicity. Cavell's philosophy walks a tightrope between objectivity, philosophy, and history.

I have been waiting to end on this note. Since his death this past summer, Stanley Cavell's posthumous life, both within and outside of professional philosophy, has begun

to snake its way down a long and undetermined trail. And although we might think we understand this trail, since we know it must in some sense exist, in fact we do not have an adequate picture of it, because it is still in formation. We are forming it.

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